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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

15¢

JANUARY 11 1936

DIAMOND BRAND *By* GLENN H. WICHMAN

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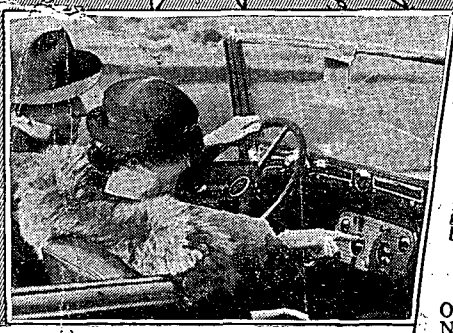

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Provides Faster Pick-Up---More Power---
Greater Mileage and Smoother Running.

GET FREE INFORMATION

CHRYSLER
Have tried the Vacu-matic and it sure is fine. Better pick-up with a 30% gas saving.—John C. Martin, Pa.

PLYMOUTH
I am amazed at Vacu-matic performance. It's giving me 5 more miles per gallon. Walter Zielinski, Ill.

V-8 FORD
I installed both Vacu-matics and they work excellent. On my own V8 Ford I notice wonderful performance in pickup, get-away and gas saving. — Burt Burnett, Mich.

BUICK
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With Vacu-matic I have increased my mileage from 10.1 to 14.2 miles per gallon. I figure I save over $75.00 a year in gasoline. R. K. Radtke. Wis.

SAVES $180 A YEAR
On my Plymouth 6 I obtained an average of 22 miles per gal lon, an increase of 7 miles. This means a saving of $15 a month or $180 a year F S. Peck, Calif.

CHEVROLET
Please send me a Vacu-matic for a Mo del A. The mileage on my 1933 Chevrolet jumped from 18 to 22 miles per gal. with Vacu-matic. — Paul P Haas, Mass.

ALL WELL PLEASED
Enclosed find order for 12 more. Everyone I have sold is giving from 4 to 6 more miles per gallon. I have 3 more orders for V8 Ford. Every body is well pleased.—J. O. Carll, Texas.

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Have been using the Vacu-matic for a month. I used to get 20 to 22 miles per gal. Now I get 30 to 33 miles. It is amazing the difference it makes.—James W Barr, Canada.

NASH
On my Advanced 6 Nash gained 17½% in mileage. The car will idle down to 3 miles an hour and then take gas without a complaint. — J. Showalter, Mo

DODGE
Just completed 2310 miles on 92 gallons in my 1933 Dodge 6. This figures 25 miles while before I averaged only 20 miles per gal. on trips. — Al Fruzyna, Calif

OLDSMOBILE
I am well pleased with Vacu-matic on our Oldsmobile. A test proved it to give 18 miles per gal. Before we considered 13 good. — Arthur Williams, N Y

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited letters received from Vacu-matic users.

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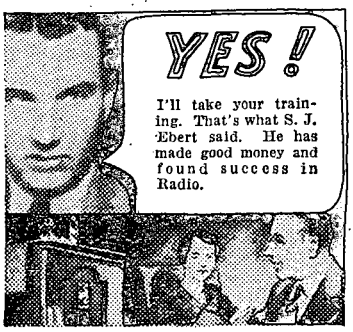

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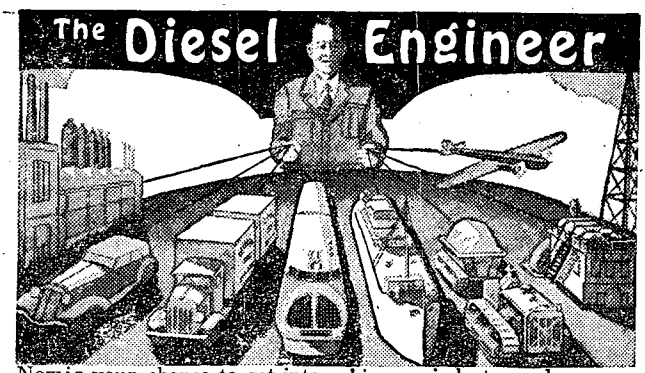

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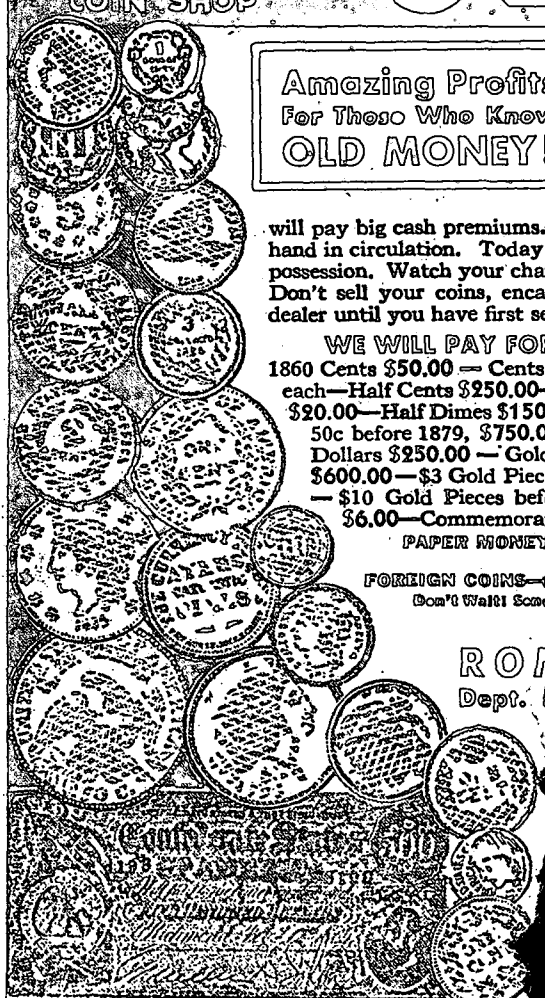

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29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
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32x4	2.65	.85	30x5	3.30	1.35
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33x5	3.75	1.45	38x7	9.95	3.95
34x5	3.95	2.00	36x8	10.65	3.95
32x6	7.25	2.75	40x8	12.65	4.15
36x6	9.00	3.95			

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6.50-20	3.60	1.95	8.25-20	7.60	4.95
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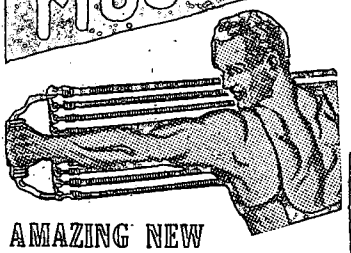

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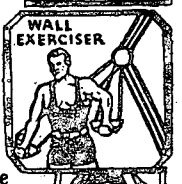

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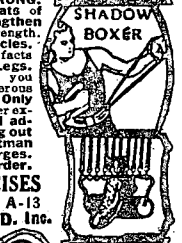

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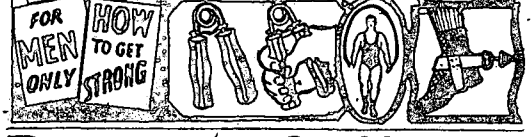

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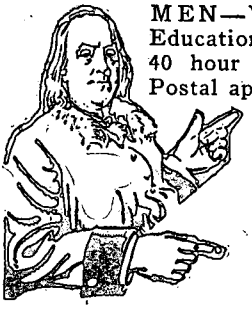

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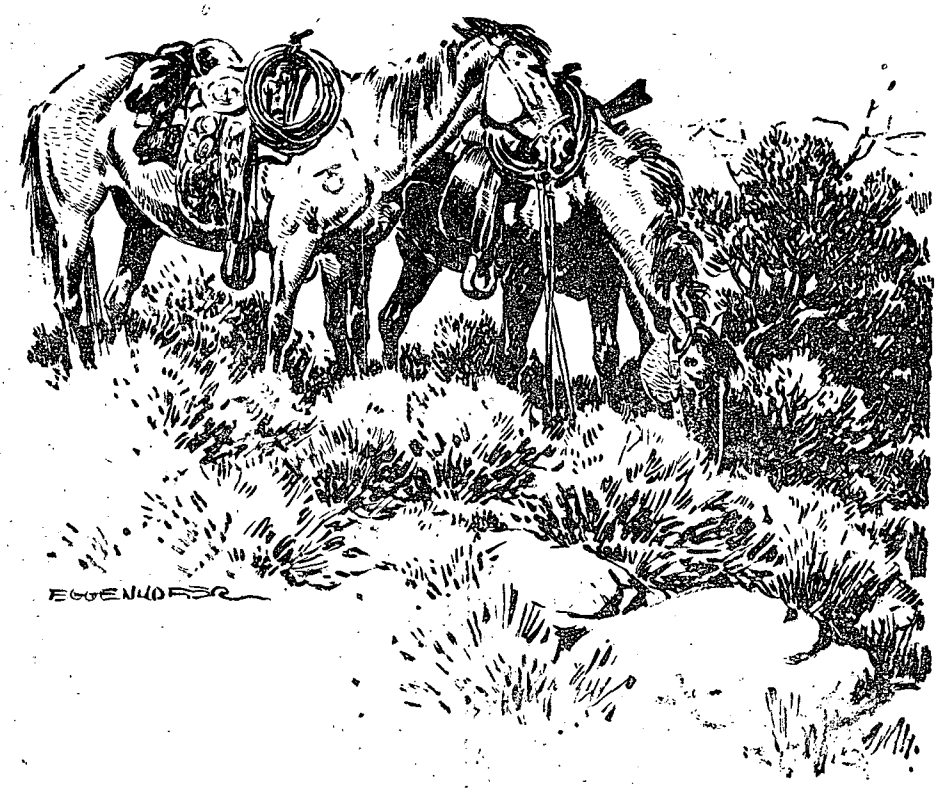

DIAMOND TRAIL

CHAPTER I.

GUN TRAP.

HAD it so suited him, Zed Summers might have adorned his loosely fitting vest with no fewer than a half dozen deputy sheriff's stars regularly and legally issued by as many counties. But he rarely, if ever, had as much as one of them about him and rarely, if ever, was he known to wear one. A lone wolf he had become with ten long years of restless, ever-shifting, blood-smeared trail behind him. A righter of wrongs, a solver of range-land mysteries, a friend of the weak, a relentless and Argus-eyed pursuer of the evildoer. Just men looked at him in awe and admiration; the guilty could do what suited them and take the consequences. Gun, knife, or slinging fist, Zed Summers had yet to meet his equal. Yet he was neither a proud nor boastful man and shunned even faint praise as he would the devil. The job was all that interested him —and strangely enough, the thought of failure always dogged his footsteps.

Zed's scene of operations had extended from the Canadian border to Mexico, from the Mississippi to within sight of the blue Pacific. Roving jobs were his oyster; never in his thirty-two years of existence

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By GLENN H. WICHMAN

Author of "Bounty Butts In," etc.

had he been able to settle down to the strict routine of a sheriff's office for more than three months at a time. It was a cattleman's association in Wyoming that supplied him with most of his leads, for the word had quietly gone around that there was a man who could be summoned in time of need. The fee was never a matter of serious consideration; it depended entirely upon the ability of the client to pay. Many, many times they hadn't been able to pay anything at all.

It was a letter, forwarded from Wyoming, that had brought Zed Summers over the mountains. There were no particulars given as to what he was to do; simply that he was to meet two men at an appointed place and at an appointed time. The matter was both urgent and secret, particularly secret. There would be danger on every hand, so the letter had stated, for the man who undertook the mission. After reading the short epistle, the deputy had pondered the matter no longer than a minute, then he had mounted his sorrel and had ridden for the mountains to the east. Two hundred miles of steady travel now lay behind him. Shadows were long to the eastward and twilight was not far away as he came up into what he had been told was Gun Sight Pass. This country and the valley that spread out below was new to him,

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and the people, as far as he knew, would be strangers.

Zed did not pause as he came through the cut in the high hills. He had thoughts of making camp somewhere where there would be grass and water on the flat below, before darkness overtook him. It was on the morrow, high noon, when the rendezvous with the two men was scheduled to take place. There would be ample time to find the spot in the early hours of morning.

THE road he had been following seemed as old as the eternal hills, a rutted, brush-fringed, narrow, crooked highway that showed signs of but scant travel. Zed Summers was no more than a hundred feet down the road from the summit of the pass when there came the ear-splitting crash of an explosion. It was as though the world had been suddenly torn apart. He rocked in the saddle. Even in his momentary confusion he knew that the blast had originated no more than six feet from his right ear. It sounded like the roar of a cannon. As though brushed by an unseen hand, his Stetson was neatly plucked from his head. Instantly, with one swift movement of his right leg, Zed was on the ground. The sound of the explosion echoed and reëchoed through the hills. He could feel the trickle of warm blood on his forehead.

Thoughts registered with the speed of lightning on Zed's nimble mind. Even as a rush of air and a volley of slugs passed near him, he knew it was an ambush. The sorrel, at a yank on the reins, stopped instantly. No sooner was Zed on the ground than twin guns were in his hands. A billow of smoke was rising from the brush on the south side of the road. He fired from the hip. Two slugs went screaming into the undergrowth. He, himself, followed right behind them. A split second and he knew that there was no man hidden there.

The echoes of the explosion faded. Then he could hear the thunder of hoofs some distance below him and down the grade. The assassin was fleeing from the scene and making more noise doing it than a frightened deer on a mountainside. The man was not following the road but was tearing down a side canyon as fast as his plunging horse would carry him. The temptation to follow the skunk was nearly overwhelming, yet Zed Summers put the temptation instantly aside. Darkness was coming on. There would be no chance to keep the trail. The matter would have to wait. It would wait, but it would never be forgotten.

Zed had been astonished at the rapidity with which the assassin had made good his escape. How the man had fired, mounted, and gone as far as he had in such a short space of time was puzzling. The deputy would look into that, but first he would see if the sorrel was injured. Leaving the brush, he saw that the horse was still there and none the worse for wear. A moment and he recovered his Stetson, or, rather, he had recovered what was left of it. The peak of the high crown was entirely missing.

"Scattergun," thought Zed, "well filled with chunks of lead. No wonder it sounded like a cannon." He took stock of his own injuries and found that they consisted of no more than a blood-smeared crease across the top of his forehead that hadn't much more than penetrated the skin. "Close one," he concluded. "If the gun had been aimed a little

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lower, my head would be missin' now instead of the top of my hat."

He hurried into the brush and in a moment had discovered how the ambush had been handled. In the low crotch of a sinuous manzanita a shotgun had been securely tied to the tree, the muzzle pointing upward. It was a ten-gauge, double-barreled gun, and both barrels had been fired. A fine piano wire ran from the two triggers and around a stout branch. He followed the wire from where it turned and out into the road. It ran all the way across the road, a few inches up from the ground. The end was tied to a bush three or four feet off the edge of the highway.

"My horse sprang the gun trap with his foreleg," Zed told himself. "But the jasper who arranged it missed it a little on his aim. Not surprising. It'd be hard to figure where I'd be in the road an' how high I'd sit up on the sorrel." The deputy painstakingly searched the ground. Something of a grin puckered his thin lips. "Gents who do these kind of things always make mistakes." He chuckled. "Even if he was a mighty painstaking rascal, this jasper, too, made a mistake."

He quit the scene of the intended murder and walked the hundred feet back to the top of Gun Sight Pass. Five feet from the side of the trail he found the spot where the man had waited until he saw him coming up the road. A sharp-eyed man could have followed his upward progress for a mile. "When he was sure it was me," concluded the deputy, "he went back and strung the wire across the road. Everything else had been previously arranged. Then he sat there on his horse at a safe distance, waiting for me to spring my own trap. I sprung it——"

He took the scattergun from the crotch of the manzanita, removed the barrels from the stock, and tied the two pieces on behind the saddle, using the piano wire to secure them. Once more he searched the ground in the immediate vicinity, then he mounted and continued on his way.

All sounds of the fleeing man had long since ceased. Zed gave him no immediate thought, but he was mightily concerned with what had happened and the implications that might be drawn from it. The joint writers of the letter had assured him that they were the only ones who knew of his projected journey or the reason for it. Perhaps they had talked too much. Many men, so Zed Summers had observed, had the bad habit of confiding their affairs to others under the bond of secrecy. Such secrets were seldom kept, regardless of the bond. Zed took no stock in the notion that gossiping was confined to the weaker sex; three times out of four he would rather trust a secret with a woman than with a man.

"One thing's clear, anyway," he thought. "Some one knew I was coming who hadn't ought to have known, and whoever the gent is, he's no bosom friend of mine. A sneaking skunk who planned things too elaborately for his own good. A crafty fellow with the soul of a hyena."

Swiftly Zed pushed down the grade in the gathering gloom. Shortly he left the road. As darkness closed around him, he had found the water and the grass he sought. A fire was out of the question. He ate cold food from the saddlebag, sat there with his back to a tree, munching hard-tack. Finished with that, he smoked his quota of cigarettes, lolled in the bunch grass staring into the darkness. Rather

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impatiently he finally rolled up in his single blanket but found consolation in the thought that long before this time to-morrow he would know full well what was in the wind.

CHAPTER II.

THE MISSING TREASURE.

ZED SUMMERS was up and around at the first streak of dawn. When daylight came, he built a nearly smokeless fire. Coffee boiled in the small pot he always carried with him in his wanderings, and bacon sizzled in a blackened skillet. Less than an hour and he had retraced his horse's hoofprints to the road that he had been following the day before. Here he turned to the left and recalled the exact directions that the letter had contained:

> Follow the road up over Gun Sight Pass and down into Sonoma Valley toward the town of Ashford Springs. When you come to a fork, continue on the main road for an even mile beyond it. Leave the road here and turn at right angles to your left. A mile and a half and you'll come to what is known as Rattlesnake Wash. Drop down into the bottom of it and follow down the dry stream bed until you come to three large boulders of the same size and shape, and spaced so that they form a perfect triangle, fifty feet on each side. We'll be waiting for you there at noon.

The deputy followed the directions to the letter and arrived at the scene of meeting an hour before the appointed time. This was as he had planned it; he wanted a chance to observe his clients from a place of concealment before they had a chance to see him. But no sooner had he arrived at the three boulders than there was the sound of some one coming down the side of the wash on foot. Zed dismounted, and in a moment two men had put in their appearance.

"We're Nels Holliday an' George Duke," said one of them, as they came up. "I'm Duke. I recognize you, Summers. Saw you once at the Pendleton rodeo. But I was only one of the spectators. I don't reckon you'll remember me."

"I don't recall ever having seen you," admitted Zed Summers, as he shook hands.

George Duke then introduced Nels Holliday. They talked a moment, and it developed that Duke was a rancher and owned the Circle C, a corner of which they were now on. Holliday owned and operated the general store in Ashford Springs. Both men were of about the same age and build. Zed took them to be in either their late thirties or early forties. Rather prepossessing fellows, too, and not at all bad-looking. Duke wore the usual range-land garb; the storekeeper, Holliday, was dressed something like a dandy—white silk shirt, whipcord breeches, and leather boots that would have shone like twin mirrors except for the dust that covered them.

The storekeeper passed around a bag of fine cut and the book of papers. They walked to the shade of a tree and sat down on rocks beneath it.

George Duke held out an envelope to the deputy. "Here's a thousand for you, Summers, as a retainer. Me an' Nels contributed it fifty-fifty."

"Little early to talk about pay," said Zed, as he dropped the money on the ground in front of him. "Sometimes I run across jobs that I don't care to handle."

"You'll take this one," said Holliday, chuckling, "judgin' from what I've heard of you." The storekeeper was looking at the deputy's Stetson. "What under the sun happened to your sky piece, Summers?

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Looks like a goat had had his breakfast on it."

"Lead-bitten," answered Zed. He told briefly what had happened to him on the previous evening. "One of you gents possibly let the secret of my comin' here slip by you."

"Not me!" exclaimed George Duke. "But, come to think about it, before we actually decided to send for you, we may have talked a little too freely. However, we've been as mum as clams since writin' the letter."

"Well, I certainly didn't say anything," put in the store man. "But it sort of complicates things, don't it? I can see now, Summers, why you may not take the job."

"The ambush will have nothin' to do with me refusin'," Zed Summers assured them. "In fact, it makes it almost a cinch that I *will* take it. Let's have the particulars."

BOTH men started to tell the story at the same time, so they compromised by deciding that Nels Holliday would do the narrating for the two of them.

"To begin with," said Nels, "what's happened here doesn't concern either of us personally. It's no fuzz off our heads or money in our pockets. It's just the contrary. We're merely trying to do a generous thing by a young woman we both admire. She needs help if ever a woman did, an' that's why it is we've brought you here.

"Dolly Hackstaff's the woman's name; she lives on the 3 Bar 4. The girl's an orphan. Her mother died three years ago; her father right recently. Her dad, Jim Hackstaff, was as queer an old buzzard as ever lived. Three weeks ago to-morrow he was murdered! It was a heartless, cold-blooded killing. Robbery was the motive. The man or men who did it wanted the treasure that old Hackstaff had been hoarding all his life. They got it."

"Treasure?" repeated Zed. "What do you mean?"

"It'll surprise you," continued Holliday. "Hackstaff didn't hoard the things you'd expect a cowman to save, such as gold, silver, land, or money in the bank. Every dollar he got hold of went into diamonds! That was the only thing he put any store by. Banks were one of his aversions. Currency, so he said, might rot or be destroyed by fire. Gold and silver were too bulky for him to handle easily. But a man can carry a fortune in diamonds and hardly be aware of it. Jim Hackstaff had at least a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in blue-white stones."

"Diamonds!" exclaimed Zed Summers. "I've looked for nearly everything at one time or another, but this is the first time I've ever looked for such things. How'd the thing happen?"

Holliday cleared his throat. "It was a fiendish affair. The man who did it caught Jim Hackstaff there on the ranch alone in broad daylight. Much of what actually happened is conjecture. But, anyway, Dolly came riding back from Ashford Springs to find the house on fire. She rushed inside to discover her father on the sitting-room floor, his head bashed in. There was still some life in him. Dolly managed to drag him out onto the veranda and then off under some sycamores. The only thing Jim managed to say before he died was: 'The diamonds —got 'em—they're gone——'

"Some one had tortured him to make him reveal the hiding place of the treasure. His feet were bare, and there were the marks of red-hot running irons all over them. After they had got the diamonds, those

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devils wanted to cover up the crime. They slugged Jim on the head and set fire to the house. All trace of the crime would have been removed if Dolly hadn't come riding back from Ashford Springs earlier than she had been expected." The storekeeper paused and passed a hand over his hot forehead. "The whole thing came within an ace of being one of them unsolved mysteries. Now there's at least a ghost of a chance of unraveling it."

"Has the local star toter been workin' on this?" asked Zed Summers.

The two men laughed, and then George Duke, the rancher, said:

"I'm a great hand to respect the law, but it's a strain on a fella sometimes to respect Sheriff Peterson. He's solid hickory from the neck up. Peterson poked around the ashes, listened to Dolly's story, and rode furiously here and there for a day or so looking for the murderer. He means well but as a man hunter he'd make a good hemstitcher. You can judge for yourself how much we can expect from him."

"Apparently not very much," admitted Zed. "You gents desire, then, to have Hackstaff's death avenged?"

"That's not our chief idea," explained Holliday, as he once more took up the story. "Jim's dead, an' nothin' you or any one else can do will bring him back to life. What we got you here for is to find the diamonds. They're rightfully Dolly's, an', incidentally, if she gets them back, they'll save the 3 Bar 4 for her.

"Old Hackstaff had always kept the spread mortgaged to the limit. That was fine as long as he was alive an' had the diamonds, an' things were going well with the cattle. But you know what beef prices have been the past couple of years! The value of land depends on the price of meat on the hoof. In other words, there's no equity in the 3 Bar 4 an' won't be until cattle prices go up. Dolly can't hold on until then. The mortgage is so old now that it's grown whiskers. Yesterday the banker at Ashford Springs started the foreclosure. Nobody blames him; he's not a bad sort of a bird, but he naturally has to look after his depositors."

"Are either of you gents married?" suddenly asked Zed.

Both men shook their heads, rather dolefully.

"I take it, then," continued the deputy, as a smile flashed across his lips, "that your interest in Dolly Hackstaff is hardly what would be called platonic."

Nels Holliday laughed outright. "That's a six-bit word for this country, Summers. But both me an' Duke understand what you mean. You're looking at a couple of rejected suitors. We're out of the picture, plumb out, but we have no bitterness toward Dolly. It was up to her to decide, an' she decided against both of us. That was her privilege. But we admire and respect her so much that we want to help her. We've formed sort of a partnership to do that. Our only concern is for her happiness."

"Fine," admitted Zed Summers, "an' slightly contrary to the usual run of things. Then Dolly hasn't any immediate matrimonial prospects?"

"She has," put in George Duke. "She's engaged to marry young Bill Medberry. Bill's a line rider on the 3 Bar 4. Worked for her paw; still works there. Fifty a month an' found. That's goin' to be tough on Dolly. Imagine 'em thinkin' of settin' up housekeepin' on that!"

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"Young folks usually manage," murmured Zed. "It's remarkable the way they manage. But, of course, it'd be a darn sight easier for them if the girl had what was rightfully hers."

"We intend to see that she does have," said Holliday. "Me an' George ain't exactly made of money, but it'll be worth a thousand each to us if the stones can be returned. Naturally we have our ideas as to who may have taken them. There're two men we chiefly suspect. The first is Bill Medberry. We hate to mention him that way bceause you'll think it's just a case of sour grapes with us. But that isn't the idea at all. Medberry's only been in the valley about six months. Nobody seems to know where he came from, an' he's uncommonly tight-lipped about his past. Gives the impression of being a man who's seen things an' done things. He'd be too smart to run off if he had the diamonds. He'd wait until the hue an' cry blew over."

"You doubt, then, the honesty of his affection for the girl?"

"Personally, I do. He's the kind of a jasper who could play a long hand. May be playing one now, for all I know."

"Uh-huh," grunted Zed. "Anything's possible. Who's the second suspect?"

"A man," continued Holliday, "who calls himself Honest John Danford. He runs the biggest saloon an' gambling parlor in Ashford Springs. There's a buzzard for you who gets up early in the morning! As cool, an' heartless, an' as cunning a skunk as you'll ever find. We may suspect Bill Medberry, but we suspect Honest John ten times more than we do him.

"Here's another thing: Danford's the only man in these parts who wears diamonds for ornaments. A couple in rings on his fingers, and an extra big one in his necktie. He'd be a perfectly logical thief an', besides that, he's a fellow who'd stoop to anything. And he must have known all about the diamonds. Jim Hackstaff never talked about 'em except when he had a few drinks too many. He always did his drinking in Honest John's place. You get the idea?"

"Sure," said Zed Summers. "I've seen such situations."

"Danford's a man that'll have to be handled with gloves," advised Holliday. "He keeps a first-class lead tosser to look after his interests in the saloon. A fellow called Slim Mattoon. Slim's a man to keep an eye on. Honest John's makin' money, too, in spite of the price of beef. There's placer gold bein' worked up on Bear Cat Creek. That's a considerable distance from here, but the miners come down to Ashford Springs to celebrate. When Danford gets through with 'em, they're lucky if they have their shirts left. Naturally there's plenty of tough customers hang around that barroom who haven't any visible means of support. They'll bear looking into, the same as Bill an' Honest John."

Nels Holliday reached over and put a friendly hand on the deputy's knee. Then he continued: "If Danford has the diamonds an' if he was to discover what you're here for, Summers, you wouldn't last twelve hours. Between him an' his gunman, you wouldn't stand a Chinaman's chance. That's why we've met you here on the quiet. That ambush you ran into's got me worried. You don't suppose that it was meant for some one else an' that you accidentally stumbled into it?"

"Possibly," admitted Zed. "But

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that's for me to worry about. A man in my business always has plenty of wanderin' enemies."

George Duke was on his feet and pointing to the deputy's sorrel.

"See you brought the shotgun along with you," he said. He then walked over to the horse. "Mind makin' me a present of the scattergun, Summers? I've been wishin' that I had a ten-gauge, double-barrel for some time."

"Sorry," answered the deputy, "but it isn't mine. One of these days I hope to return it to the man who owns it."

The rancher and the storekeeper laughed at this.

"I'll bet you return it," said Holliday, "with compound interest. Don't blame you. But I'd hate to be the man who gets it."

"Me, too," said Duke. He left the sorrel and came back under the tree. "I got a favor to ask, Summers. If you find the stones, me an' Nels want you to return them to us. It may sound kind of childish, but me an' my partner want the pleasure of returning them to Dolly ourselves, in person. You won't mind agreeing to that?"

"Not at all," answered Zed. "I'm pullin' out now. All I ask of you men is to go about your business the way you've always gone about it. If you run across me at Ashford Springs and have anything to tell me, meet me like you would any stranger."

"I've a better plan than that," put in Duke. "I'll take you on at my ranch as a new hand. Then I'll see to it that you have plenty of leisure to do your work. That'll give you a safe explanation for being in the valley, in case something threatens to fall on you."

The deputy interrupted with a shake of his head. "I wouldn't care much for such an arrangement. I prefer to be foot-loose."

"I almost insist upon it," continued George Duke, "for your own safety."

Once more Zed Summers shook his head.

"Let him paddle his own canoe, George," put in Holliday. "It's him that's takin' the risk, not us."

"Fair enough," agreed the rancher. "But workin' on my spread looked to me like such an easy way 'out' for him in case he ran into trouble."

Zed picked up the envelope filled with money that was still on the ground between his knees. He handed it to the rancher.

"You keep this, Duke."

Duke gasped. "You're not takin' the job then? You ridin' back to where you come from?"

"You bet your life I'm takin' the job," quickly answered Zed Summers. He got to his feet. "One of you men give me the lay of the land around here. The locations of the ranches, the roads, the town, an' so on. Anything that'll help me find my way around."

Nels Holliday undertook the task. He sketched the topography of the valley in great detail, drawing rough maps of it in the loose ground with his forefinger. A quarter of an hour and he had finished.

"Thanks," said Zed. "When I make some progress, I'll let you know."

He mounted while the two men stood and watched him.

"Good luck!" called Holliday. Then he quickly added as he stepped closer: "Here's somethin' that I'd almost forgot. Me an' George wish that you could do this thing without letting Dolly Hackstaff know that you've done it. We'd sort of like to surprise her. Don't think we're actin' too much like a couple of

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kids, but we want to show her that our hearts are in the right place. Even if she's turned us down, we want to show her that we're men."

"I'll do the best I can by both of you," answered Zed.

He wheeled the sorrel then and rode swiftly up out of Rattlesnake Wash. He paused when he reached the flat top of the mesa and sat there for a moment, looking back over his shoulder.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHERIFF'S BLACKJACK.

ZED SUMMERS rode into Ashford Springs just as the sun was sinking in the west. It was a typical cow town of two or three hundred inhabitants, a short main street fringed on either side with the usual collection of mercantile establishments, the dwellings scattered here and there among the cottonwoods behind the one-story business buildings. A good many men loitered on the dimly lighted board walks; many of them looked like miners, the balance had the stamp of the range indelibly upon them.

A moment and Zed Summers passed the saloon that he'd been told of. It was by all odds the widest and the longest building in Ashford Springs, a barnlike structure with a high false front upon which had been painted the words: "Honest John Danford's Place." Sounds of conviviality came from within; there was the faint rattle of poker chips and the clink of glasses.

Zed was mildly amused as he read the sign. "When a fellow advertises his virtue in letters five feet high," he thought, "it's time to have a look at him."

He did not immediately pause at the saloon, however, but continued down the street to the livery barn, where he left his sorrel. After seeing that the horse was well taken care of, he went diagonally across the street to a restaurant and laid in his first square meal in three days. Finished with the meal, he recrossed the thoroughfare and entered "Honest John" Danford's place of business.

A long bar ran along the left side of the room; there was a cleared space in the center for dancing; the right-hand side was given over to games of chance. Dice, chuck-a-luck, keno, faro, poker, and in the far corner was a roulette wheel. No more than half the games were being played, but it was still early in the evening; Ashford Springs hadn't as yet come to life. To the rear of the main room were smaller rooms for private use and a hallway that led to them.

Zed took all of this in with one swift glance as he walked the length of the long bar and chose his stand in such a position that he could not only watch the bartenders and the barroom but the entrance to the rooms in the rear as well.

"Beer," he said to the dispenser of liquid nourishment, "an' let's not have too big a collar on it."

"Sure," answered the bartender.

Zed could feel the man's eyes boring into him. Then the fellow's gaze shifted and he was looking up at the deputy's Stetson, which had the peak of the crown missing.

"What happened to the sky piece?" asked the man, with a smile.

"Rats gnawed on it," answered Zed. He knew instantly that the bartender's interest was not in the hat but was in him personally. The man wanted to make conversation, had a thirst to find out more about him, for Zed Summers looked the part of the wandering gunman, if

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ever a man did. This was as he'd hoped it would be and was the rôle he'd elected to play. Up to a certain point he'd play it, as he had often played it in the past. "Shuffle off an' get the beer," he directed, for the man still stood there staring at him.

The deputy drained the glass, remained standing there for no longer than three minutes, and then, as he'd expected, two men came out from the narrow hallway that led to the rooms in back and started toward him. The bartender had already passed the word that here was a stranger who needed watching.

As the men approached, Zed leaned lazily against the bar and sized them up. One of them was short, pudgy, round-faced, and dressed with rare elegance. He wore a black Prince Albert coat, striped pearl-gray trousers, and his wide expanse of vest was a thing of beauty. It was double-breasted, the color of a fawn's flank, and was crossed, at the proper angle, by a gold chain with massive links. He wore a soft black Stetson pushed well back upon his head. Prosperity rested gracefully upon him; success and well-being oozed from all his pores.

"It couldn't be anybody but Honest John," thought Zed. "He reminds me of a well-fed buzzard."

Danford's companion was years younger and of about the deputy's age and build. A wall-eyed man, with an unpleasant face and a gun on either hip in tied-down holsters.

"Must be Slim Mattoon," concluded Zed. "He'd kill a man for a plugged nickel or, mebbe, he'd do it just to see him kick."

They came up to the bar then, the fancily dressed man with his hand outstretched.

"I'm John Danford," he said, "an' this is my friend and employee, Slim Mattoon."

Zed Summers shook hands with them in turn.

"Call me Blondy," he said. "That's the name I go by when I can't think of any other."

Honest John Danford laughed perfunctorily. "That's all right with us. Come on; we'll have a drink. When a stranger of some importance comes to town, I always plan to make him welcome."

"You flatter me," said Zed. "Ain't often they turn out a band for me." He continued to lean on the corner of the bar so as to watch the room; Danford and Mattoon took positions along the front of the counter.

The bartender brought a bottle of Honest John's private stock. They poured in turn. A considerable number of men were now drifting in from the street, the bar was well lined with thirsty customers.

"Here's to you," Zed said.

They tossed off the drinks and, in compliment to the whisky, scorned to use the chasers.

"Havin' got that circulatin' through our systems," began Danford, as he turned to Zed, "I'm naturally curious as to where you're bound for. Don't think I'm hornin' in on your private affairs, but I got a good-sized stake here in Ashford Springs. The mill run of gents don't interest me at all. But occasionally somebody drifts along that —well, it's just as well to find out where the guy stands. No offense, now, you understand, but I gotta be careful."

"I take it you don't like the looks of me," Zed said. "Mebbe it's my hat that bothers you?" He was looking intently at them, watching their reactions, but he gave no out-

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ward sign of unusual interest, just stood there with his eyes half closed, grinning at them.

"Hadn't noticed it," said Mattoon. "Looks as though you needed another one."

"Yeah," said Honest John; "if it rains, you'll get your head wet." Annoyance showed plainly enough on his pasty face. "You know well enough, Blondy, that I wasn't speakin' of your headpiece. Why beat around the bush? You've drank my liquor, an' now I'm tellin' you somethin'. I'm king-pin here in Ashford Springs. When somethin' happens that looks as though it might upset my apple cart, I see that it ain't upset. You didn't come here to punch cows or to mine placer. If you're just driftin' through, that's O. K. If you aim to loaf around here, I wanta know which side of the fence you're on."

"You've said a mouthful," drawled Zed Summers. "The longest speech I've had tossed my way in years. Never was much of a hand for bein' pushed about. I'm almost on the point, Danford, of telling you to go to the devil. I haven't quite made up my mind whether to, or whether not to. But if it'll interest you, I'm stayin' here in Ashford Springs until I get good an' ready to move on. As for the fence you mention—that's up to you."

HONEST JOHN and his gunman both stiffened. Mattoon moved a foot or two away from the bar so as to have free movement for his arms. Danford hooked his thumbs in his trousers pockets and likewise stepped clear of the imitation mahogany. This put his hands in an excellent position for a quick draw from the shoulder holsters that were under his two armpits.

"Easy!" Zed chuckled. "You gents relax, an' this time, we'll have a drink on me. But don't get it in your heads that I'm backin' down. If you still want a quarrel when we're done drinkin', I'll be right glad to oblige you." He motioned for the bartender.

"Cool one, ain't you?" said Honest John, as he poured himself a scant two fingers. "I think, son, that I could use you, an' it wouldn't be to your disadvantage either."

"Job—you mean?"

"Yeah—a job. An' the kind of a job that was made to order."

They tossed down the drinks then, half smiling at each other, but whether the smiles meant sudden death or lasting friendship was something that no man could tell.

Just as Zed put down his glass, he became aware of something that was happening farther down the bar. Two or three feet beyond "Slim" Mattoon stood a pleasant-faced young cowboy who was absent-mindedly drinking from a foaming mug. His thoughts were obviously many miles from the barroom, his eyes were wandering up toward the ceiling.

A man with a sheriff's star on his vest was approaching the puncher from behind. The sheriff held a blackjack in his right hand, was stealthily approaching, and, unless all the signs were wrong, had the intention of using the blackjack on the cowboy's head. Years before, Zed had met an officer who had had that method of serving warrants. He would knock a man down, drag him off to the lockup, and when the prisoner came back to life, tell him that he was under arrest.

"This gent's up to the same thing," thought Zed. "There's no need of it." He acted then without a second's hesitation. "Pardon me;

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gents," he said to Honest John and Slim, as he stepped quickly around them. "I'll be back in a minute."

He reached the unsuspecting cowboy's side just as the sheriff had raised the blackjack for a blow behind the ear. Zed's right fist came up. Then he brought his fist down on the sheriff's wrist with all the force of a sledge hammer. It was a stunning, nerve-paralyzing blow. The lawman's fingers opened, and the blackjack fell to the floor.

"Don't make a fuss about it, sheriff," hoarsely whispered Zed. "You're licked before you start."

But instead the sheriff ripped out an oath. Staggering back, his left hand darted for his gun. He was roaring like an insane man. The barroom was in instant confusion. He began to draw——

Zed's hands moved quicker then than any eye could follow. Twin guns were in his fingers. Yet even with his life hanging by a thread, he had time to give a thought to innocent spectators who would be in the line of fire. Zed jumped sidewise. Four feet he leaped through the air before his gun roared. One belching stab of flame came from his six-gun, and the sheriff's Colt was torn from his hand before it had barely cleared the leather, went clattering across the floor, and thumped up against the bar.

"Steady!" yelled Zed, as he stood there, his two guns weaving.

No one made a move to draw. Absolute silence had now come to the barroom. It was Honest John who first found his voice.

"There's a little misunderstanding here, gents!" he called out. "Nothin' to worry about! It's all over now! The next round of drinks is on the house!"

Confusion came then and a stampede for the bar. The cowboy, still unaware of what had nearly happened to him, had gone back to his beer and continued to sip it. But there were four men who had no interest in the refreshments—Danford, Slim, the sheriff, and Zed Summers. They were grouped together in a loose circle in the center of the room.

"That was a fool thing you did!" snarled the sheriff at Zed.

"Shut up, Peterson!" put in Danford. "You're lucky you're alive. It'd have been a hundred times easier an' safer for Blondy to have shot you than to have done what he did. You ought to thank him instead of getting mad. It was the slickest piece of gun work I've seen in twenty years. What was you up to, anyway?"

Sheriff Peterson was massaging his aching wrist. "I got a warrant for Bill Medberry, the wrangler who's standin' there at the bar. He's the gent who's goin' to marry Dolly Hackstaff. Bill's kinda hot-tempered. I thought I'd slug him first an' tell him about the warrant afterwards. Thought mebbe it'd save a shootin'. There wasn't nothin' wrong about hittin' him, was there? He's wanted for murder!"

"I reckon there wouldn't have been," said Honest John Danford. "Go ahead an' hit him."

CHAPTER IV.

ZED TAKES A JOB.

IT was Slim Mattoon who picked both the heavy blackjack and the six-gun off the sawdust-covered floor and returned them to Sheriff Peterson. The sheriff promptly started for the bar with the evident intention of finishing what he had begun. But he had taken no more than two steps when

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Zed's fingers closed around his arm and stopped him.

"It's bad luck to hit a man when he ain't lookin'," quietly said Zed Summers. "It's especially bad luck to the one that does the hittin'. Better not stretch your rabbit's foot too far, sheriff."

"Turn loose of me!" growled Peterson. "I've taken enough off you already!"

Zed played then both for time and for effect. "Who was it the young buck murdered?"

"Jim Hackstaff—if it's anything to you!"

"A stranger to me," continued Zed. "But I still don't like your method of gatherin' this young jasper in. It's crude. Tell you what I'll do. You let *me* do it. It'll be an object lesson to you that may save your neck sometime."

"Not a bad idea," spoke up Honest John. "I don't like these rows. Commotions are hard on the gamblin' games. I've been put to enough expense this evenin' already."

Slim Mattoon was cursing under his breath, whether from force of habit or because he was annoyed was hard to tell.

Peterson gave in then. "Have it your own way, man. But if you let him get away, I'll jail you in his stead!"

"Don't make me laugh," said Zed. "By the way—if the prisoner wants to know who it was swore out the warrant for his arrest, what'll I tell him?"

"Tell him nothin'!" growled the sheriff.

Softly chuckling to himself, Zed Summers advanced upon the broad back of Bill Medberry. He touched the cowboy lightly on the shoulder just as the latter was swallowing the last of the beer.

"Got somethin' to tell you, buddy," he whispered. "Kindly step away from the bar."

Zed Summers backed away. Bill Medberry turned and faced him and began following in his footsteps.

"A handsome young rider," observed Zed to himself. "No wonder Dolly Hackstaff would like him for a husband. An active man, with a temper like a hungry she-wolf."

The cowboy had caught sight of the sheriff and Slim and Honest John, who stood immediately behind the deputy. Instantly Medberry stopped moving, and so did Zed. Less than eight feet separated them.

"Take it easy, kid," whispered the deputy. "There's no use offerin' resistance. You're under arrest for the murder of——"

Young Medberry never hesitated. He sprang at the deputy with all the ferocity of a tiger. There was ample time for Zed to draw, but the thought of doing so didn't even occur to him. As it was, he was caught slightly off balance. The cowboy hit him like a charging steer. They went down together, hit the floor with a resounding crash that shook the building. Medberry's right hand was seeking the deputy's throat.

THEY rolled over and over on the floor. An instant and Zed had torn loose the grip that was around his windpipe. He struggled for a wrestler's hold and when he had it, gave Medberry a toss that sent the cowboy spinning through the air. Zed sprang up then with all the agility of a cat. The instant Medberry struck the floor, the deputy was on top of him, had him securely pinioned, the cowboy's shoulders flattened out upon the sawdust.

"You fool!" rasped Zed, his lips

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pressed close to the cowboy's ear. "I'm your friend! Saved you from a sluggin'! If you wanta trust me I'll——"

Bill Medberry relaxed and lay still, for the breath had been knocked from him and he couldn't have moved at the moment had he wanted to. The barroom was once more in confusion. There was the tramp of feet and mumbled oaths, hoarse shouts as the spectators crowded in around them.

"Stand back, you idiots!" roared Honest John. "Stand back!"

The spectators gave way as Zed Summers dragged the cowboy to his feet.

"Here's your prisoner, Peterson. Put the bracelets on him."

The sheriff grinned in satisfaction. "Pretty neat," he admitted, as he slipped the handcuffs on the cowboy's wrists, securely binding his arms behind his back.

Medberry, his face livid with anger, was mumbling incoherently.

"Better keep your mouth closed, Bill," suggested Zed. "Talk's the cheapest thing on earth and again it's sometimes the most expensive."

"Oh, he'll talk plenty," put in Peterson, "after I'm through sweatin' him to-morrow mornin'. He'll tell everything he knows an' then some."

"Ain't hard to imagine," admitted Zed.

Without more ado the sheriff marched his prisoner out through the batwing doors and disappeared into the night. Even before the doors had finished swinging, the barroom had settled down to its usual routine. A lanky fellow wearing a derby over one ear was pounding furiously on a piano. Four or five Mexican girls had appeared to dance with men who were so inclined and found no scarcity of prospective customers. A hoarse-voiced croupier was calling from the roulette wheel in the corner.

Zed spent some minutes looking the men over. He spotted a good half dozen who, judging from the looks of them, might be guilty of anything from petty larceny to murder—the usual gang of cutthroats who invariably rode in on the crest of easy money. It would be up to him to make their acquaintance, to worm his way into their confidence. It would be a dangerous game that must be attended to as soon as he had laid the necessary groundwork for it.

Zed turned then to Honest John. "This joint sounds like a boiler factory. Ain't there a place where a man can think an' talk in peace?"

"Sure," said Danford, "follow me." He turned to his gunman. "Slim, you stay out here an' keep your eyes an' ears open. If that stud dealer runs into trouble again, call me."

The deputy followed the saloon keeper down the hallway and into a small room in which a lamp was already burning. The furnishings consisted of a flat-topped desk and four or five straight-backed chairs. There were no windows in the box-like room, but there was a hole through the ceiling for ventilation.

HONEST JOHN sat down behind the desk and motioned Zed Summers to a chair in front of it. Danford drummed on the desk for a moment with his knuckles and then said:

"Blondy, I liked the way you handled yourself out there in the barroom. You've got imagination and a little sense. There's been too much blood spilled here to suit me. It hurts my sensibilities. Slim Mattoon's all right. He ain't afraid of

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anything on either two legs or four, but the trouble is that somebody has to do his thinkin' for him."

"The sheriff ain't any monument of intelligence either," offered Zed.

"Peterson means well, even if he is rather thick in the dome. What I like about him is that he never interferes in my affairs. He considers this enterprise of mine to be perfectly legitimate and what happens here to be just in the course of business. He's right. I run a straight house."

"Mebbe you've fixed it up with him?" Zed suggested.

Danford's face hardened. "That was somethin', Blondy, you might just as well not have said. I never bribe the law. Passin' it altogether, I'm offerin' you a job. The pay'll be fifty a week, which is nothin' to sneeze at."

"Fair enough," said Zed. "You're unusually generous. An' what'll the work be?"

"Keepin' order in the barroom an' preventin' too many of my gamblers from gettin' it between the eyes. There are an uncommon lot of suspicious gents in this valley an' they haven't any more sense of humor than a lot of goats. Always imagining that somebody's tryin' to slip somethin' over on 'em. They object to the odds being always against 'em."

"The house wins three times out of four," muttered the deputy, "but I suppose that's the way it ought to be."

"That's the way it'll be if you wanta earn your fifty a week. I want you to start work right away, right to-night. There's a good crowd gathered——"

Zed was dolefully shaking his head. "Sorry to disappoint you, but there's a little matter that I've got to attend to first. That's why I came here. Won't take but a couple days. Then I'll be back an' attend to the suspicious gents who've been tormentin' you."

"What is it you're goin' to do?" demanded Danford. "If you're goin' to work for me, I've got a right to know."

"It would be very easy to lie to you," muttered Zed, "an' you'd believe me an' be satisfied. But I won't even bother to do that. I lie to no one. I don't have to. It's a private matter that's been pendin' for some time. Won't take long. Nothin' that I ever do takes *very* long."

"I'll yield the point," said Honest John, "which is somethin' that I don't very often do either. An' here's another thing: My men play square with me or take the consequences. I ain't been packin' a couple of irons around twenty years for nothin'. I may hire men to do my dirty work, but that isn't because I couldn't attend to it myself. You get the idea?"

"Perfectly clear," admitted Zed. "I've no thirst to see you draw." He hitched his chair up closer to the desk and rested his elbows upon it, a cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. "I've been admirin' them two diamonds on your left hand an' the one you've got stuck in your shirt front. Must be worth a lot of money."

"Plenty," said Honest John. "I'd hate to say how much. But it's kind of a handy way to carry a nest egg. They could be turned into cash if I had to have it."

"Think you'd be afraid somebody'd take you out back an' roll you. But mebbe you've got plenty more cached away. Mebbe it wouldn't matter none."

Danford didn't answer. He got

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up from the desk in indication that the interview was over.

"Want another drink, Blondy? You're welcome to it."

"No, thanks," said Zed. "I've had enough. I'm easin' out the back door now an' then I'll be on my way. You can expect me back in, say, forty-eight hours. If somebody asks for me, say that I'm sleepin' the clock around a couple of times an' ain't to be disturbed."

"Who'll ask for you?"

"Quién sabe?" said the deputy. "But somebody might. Mebbe the sheriff might."

THEY parted in the hallway, Honest John going out into the noisy barroom and Zed out through the open back door. The night was black; the deputy stood by the doorway for a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Then he strode off through the tin-can-littered back yard in search of the Ashford Springs lockup. A quarter of an hour and, without going on the main street, he had found it. The small building was a hundred feet or more in the rear of the sheriff's shack, which fronted on the main street. Peterson's combination dwelling and office was in darkness; apparently the sheriff was nowhere about.

Zed found the lockup to be a snug, one-cell building, made of heavy planks and crisscrossed with old wagon tires that had been cut and flattened out. Twice he noiselessly circled it before he was reasonably sure that no one was watching, then he approached the door.

"Oh—Medberry!" he whispered. Three times he repeated the name before there was the sound of footsteps from within. "You all alone, Bill?"

"Yeah, I'm alone. What of it?"

Zed had some difficulty then in convincing the cowboy that he meant to help him. It didn't sound reasonable that the man who'd arrested him one hour would want to release him the next.

"You're crazy!" growled Medberry. "It's some trick. This valley's as full of snakes as a snake pit."

"Have it your own way," Zed replied. "I'm turnin' you loose, anyway. I'm doin' it for Dolly Hackstaff."

Medberry gasped in surprise at this and was all interest. "I've killed no one," he said. "The sheriff's crazy—crazy as a loon."

"Somebody's crazy besides the sheriff," continued the deputy. "I tried to find out who swore out the warrant for your arrest but didn't. Sure, now, you'll do just as I tell you if I get you out of here?"

The cowboy swore that he'd do nothing else. Zed then took a key ring from his pocket that held together any number of waferlike, notched, steel blades of great elasticity and toughness. Any burglar in the land would have been proud of that collection, and envious of Zed's ability to use them when the necessity arose.

Sheriff Peterson's bastile bore two padlocks. Zed went to work on them in the darkness, using nothing but the steel blades and a superlatively keen sense of touch. Ten minutes and the first of them was open. Five minutes more and the second yielded to the pressure of his fingers. The door squeaked dismally as he gently shoved it inward. Medberry squeezed quickly through the opening, stood there beside him.

"We'll close an' lock it," said Zed, "so as to plague the sheriff. He may think you've turned yourself into a ghost. An' perhaps he won't dis-

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cover that you're gone until some time to-morrow. Where's your horse?"

"Peterson put it in his corral, which is to the rear of the jail."

When Zed had finished closing the door and snapping the padlocks, they felt their way along the wall of the lockup to the end of it and then across the cleared space to the pole corral. A dull glow was beginning to show over the far horizon to the east.

"The moon," said Bill. "We'll have to hurry or as sure as shootin' somebody'll see us."

"Cut your plug out an' saddle it," directed Zed. "Wait here for me. I'm goin' to the livery barn an' get my horse. Then we're ridin'."

"O. K.," breathed the cowboy. "Mister, I don't know what your game is but I couldn't be any worse off than I was in jail."

The deputy was no longer listening but was walking rapidly off toward the livery barn, which was a good hundred yards up the street from the sheriff's shack. He went in through the wide rear door. There was a row of stalls on one side, piles of hay in the other, and a corridor that ran between the two. The building had no sides, just post uprights that supported the roof. Midway down the passageway hung a lantern that was suspended at the end of a wire which was fastened to one of the rafters. Zed spent a moment looking for the stable keeper but could not find him.

Then he went to the stall where the sorrel was feeding. The light was dim. He edged in beside the horse, was just reaching for his saddle that rested on the partition between two stalls when there came the sudden bark of a gun? The stab of flame was right before him, not ten feet from him. The screaming slug knocked splinters into his eyes. Cramped as he was between the horse and the side of the stall, he was slow in drawing. An instant and he had managed to turn sidewise. A Colt was in his hand.

Even before he could pull trigger, he could hear the sound of quickly running footsteps—footsteps that were rapidly fading away. The bushwhacker had gone out through the open side wall of the barn and was racing for the street.

"Didn't even bother to wait an' see if he'd hit me," murmured Zed. "The coyote! Waitin' here by my horse—— He knew I'd show up sooner or later."

There was no time to lose. The sound of the shot would be bound to arouse somebody. Zed yanked the saddle down and clapped it on the sorrel, backed the animal out of the stall, and tightened the cinch. Some one was shouting out in the street. He slipped up into the saddle, bent low, and rode out through the rear door of the barn. The shouting out in the street continued; it came now from a half dozen throats.

The glow in the east had increased in size and brilliancy; the edge of the moon just visible. Objects could now be easily distinguished. Zed gave the sorrel a touch in the flank and trotted to the sheriff's corral where Bill Medberry was already mounted and waiting.

"Follow me," called Zed, as he passed the cowboy on the run.

Together they rode off toward the south for a good two miles before the deputy drew rein. There were no signs of pursuit.

"Thunderation!" suddenly growled Summers, as he felt behind him. "When I came to Ashford Springs, I had a ten-gauge scattergun tied on the kack. It's gone now. Some low-lived son of a gun stole it. Now it

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don't look like I'd have a chance to give it back to the mangy hound who owned it."

"I'll buy the man a new one," said Medberry, "in return for what you've done for me to-night."

"No need of that," replied Zed. "The gent who owned it has it now."

CHAPTER V.

ON THE 3 BAR 4.

PRESENTLY Zed Summers and his cowboy companion reversed their direction and headed north up the valley. They gave Ashford Springs a wide berth, passed it at a distance of several miles, and continued through the moonlit night. They'd avoided the roads and would continue to avoid them. Twelve hours more and Sheriff Peterson and his posses would be bound to be abroad.

"Where to?" asked Medberry.

"Lookin' for a place to hole in an' get some shut-eye," answered Zed. "When mornin' comes, we'll ride for the 3 Bar 4 an' Dolly Hackstaff."

The cowboy warmed at the idea and then thought better of it. "Don't wanta get her in trouble for harborin' me. Peterson'll naturally look on the ranch first. He'd figure that I'd go there."

"We'll be as careful as we can," said Zed Summers.

Bill Medberry was looking quizzically at him. "Just who the devil are you, anyway?"

"When we stop for the night, I'll tell you," answered Zed. "You oughta know some likely spot."

Medberry led the way up over a hogback and down into a narrow draw. There was water there and lush grass. They unsaddled the stock and made themselves comfortable in the cool grass, for the night was warm. Cigarettes glowed in the dull light, and the air was pungent with the fragrant odor of tobacco.

"You were goin' to tell me——" prompted Bill.

"I'm a fellow given to snap judgments," began the deputy, "an' it ain't too often that I find myself mistaken. For instance, I'm going to trust you. I decided that the instant I first saw you. My life may depend upon the discretion that you use. I'm trustin' that you'll keep your shirt on better in the future than you did to-night in Honest John's saloon. By all that's reasonable, you ought to be dead now for for the way you acted. Jumpin' at me the way you did, you left yourself wide open for a slug between the ribs. Learn to play your cards with more acumen, Bill. There come times in every man's life when it's better to lose a pot without complaint an' then to wait patiently for the next shuffle."

"I know," sighed Medberry. "I was a jackass. Temper, I guess—I've always had my troubles with it."

Zed then told of the reasons that had brought him to the valley and of his intention of working in Danford's saloon and gambling palace. He ended by asking: "What's your notion of who swore out the warrant for your arrest? Take your time an' think about it. There's no hurry."

The cowboy scratched his head. "It occcurs to me there's three men who might have done it. First, there's Honest John. He was born a skunk an' ain't improved none since. I've heard whispers the past three, four days that he may have killed Jim Hackstaff an' stolen the diamonds. He's more'n likely heard those whispers, too. Naturally he'd want to turn suspicion onto some

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one else. I'd be as handy a guy as any to have it pinned onto.

"The other two men are Nels Holliday and George Duke. They hate my insides on general principles. That's why they'd do it. I've beaten 'em hands down with Dolly Hackstaff. Naturally they ain't tickled stiff over the idea of my approachin' marriage. If I was in jail or hung they——"

"It'd be natural for you to suspect them of anything that might happen to you," said Zed. "You're prejudiced. It's time now that we hit the hay."

THEY stretched out then upon their backs and slept till dawn. Zed prepared a scanty breakfast, and shortly they rode away up the valley. The 3 Bar 4 was at no great distance.

Medberry explained that the murdered Jim Hackstaff's spread was divided in two parts by a crooked gully that varied in depth from three feet to ten, and in width from five feet to twenty. That portion of the ranch which lay to the north was called the Upper Ranch and that part to the south the Lower Ranch. The 3 Bar 4 headquarters were on the north bank of the miniature wash and no more than a hundred yards from it. At Zed's direction the cowboy led the way into the gully. They rode cautiously up it in the still morning air until opposite the ranch yard. Here they dismounted and tied their horses to the brush that grew in great profusion. The country was fairly well wooded, particularly so around the ranch house.

A moment and the deputy and his companion had crawled up the sloping bank of the wash and from a place of concealment had a view of what was going on. Four men were cutting horses out of the ranch remuda and preparing to start the day's work.

"They're ridin' for Coyote Canyon," sadly remarked Medberry, "lookin' for 3 Bar 4 strays. I was supposed to go along, but they ain't waitin' for me. The boys are beginnin' to be worried about their pay. Dolly's promised 'em a beef shipment within a month regardless of the price. This outfit's totterin' on its hind legs. If the poor girl could only lay hands on them diamonds——"

"I know," interrupted Zed.

Shortly the four rannies rode away and disappeared up the valley.

"Which leaves who else on the spread?" the deputy wanted to know.

"Only Dolly an' the cook. The cook's deaf an' dumb an' never has any idea of what's goin' on outside the cook shack. You can disregard him altogether. Dolly lives in that cottage to the right there that used to be occupied by a married foreman. She's lived alone there since the ranch house was burned."

"You're stayin' here while I go an' talk to her alone," said Zed. "No matter what happens or who comes along, you stay hidden here right where you are. Keep the horses handy. If I come runnin', have 'em ready."

Zed crawled up out of the brush then and walked into the ranch yard. He passed the pile of white ashes that had once been the ranch house, walked down beside the bunk house and some distance farther on to the former foreman's three-or-four-room cottage.

A knock on the front door and it was almost immediately opened. Summers stood there hat in hand and was confronted by as satisfactory-looking a young woman as he

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had seen in many a day. Her hair was the color of ripe wheat, her eyes as blue as cobalt. Young she seemed, and frail, but there was strength there, pioneer strength that showed in the fine lines of her mouth and the broad expanse of forehead. Worry, fatigue, and loss of sleep were plainly indicated.

"I trust you're Dolly Hackstaff?" asked Zed Summers.

"I am," said the girl, "but we have no jobs here for any one."

The deputy introduced himself, talked with her a moment, but he had no credentials, other than his own word, that what he said was true. She looked him deeply in the eyes when he had finished and slowly nodded her head in understanding.

"If you were in Ashford Springs last night," said Dolly, "maybe you know what's happened to Bill Medberry? He hasn't come back from town."

Zed hesitated about breaking the news, but knew that sooner or later it would have to be done. "Bill fell into hard luck last night. He was arrested and jailed for the murder of your father."

Then the girl did the unexpected. She screamed. Zed tried to stop her.

"Why, there's Bill now!" she shouted an instant later, and pointed over Zed's shoulder. "You're mistaken!"

THE deputy turned. Bill Medberry had come up out of the gully at the sound of the girl's cry. He stood there uncertainly, his hands on his hips.

"Get back under cover, you fool!" roared Zed.

The cowboy promptly disappeared down the wash.

"He wasn't in the lockup more'n a couple hours, when I broke him out," the deputy explained to the girl. "I——"

"Come on inside," quickly interrupted Dolly Hackstaff.

The girl was trembling violently as she closed the door behind them.

"Trouble! Trouble! There's nothing but trouble. Poor Bill! He had nothing more to do with murdering and robbing dad than I did. Now he'll be on the dodge with the sheriff after him. He won't have a minute's peace."

"It'll all come out in the wash," offered Zed, "or, at least, I'll try an' make it."

"I'll bet a dollar that it was John Danford who had him arrested!" cried the girl. "I just know it was!"

Zed had nothing to say one way or the other but he did repeat to Dolly the things that he had said to Bill Medberry. The girl sat there eagerly listening, clasping and unclasping her hands, frequently wiping her forehead with her handkerchief.

"So it was Nels Holliday and George Duke who got you down here," she repeated, when he had finished. "They wanted to surprise me. I'm thankful to them. They're doing all they can——" Her voice trailed off, and she looked rather vacantly out the window.

"Go on," prompted Zed. "There's something on your mind."

"Well," she presently continued, "I just feel grateful to them, that's all. Puts me in a rather awkward position. Sort of like heaping coals of fire upon my head. George Duke's my nearest neighbor. His Circle C could do me plenty of damage if it wanted to. Yet he's gone out of his way to do me good. Has even run mavericks onto my spread that didn't belong to me. The 3 Bar 4 owes Nels Holliday money, too, for

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the provisions that we've bought at his store in Ashford Springs. My account with him isn't getting any smaller either. Yet he's never pressed me at all for payment." A shadow crossed her brow. "It wouldn't be like either one of them to get Bill into trouble even if they do feel bitter toward him." She got up then and started walking to and fro across the floor.

"The sheriff holds the answer to the warrant," said Zed. "But whether he'd tell you or not is another matter altogether. An' Peterson won't be easy to find from now on. He'll be as busy as a flea on a dog's back lookin' for Bill Medberry."

"I'll try to find the sheriff——" she began, but was interrupted by a sharp clatter of hoofs. "It's Duke an' Nels Holliday!" she announced from the window. "They're ridin' into the ranch yard."

The deputy's face had broken into a broad grin.

Dolly opened the door, and the two men dismounted and entered.

"By thunder!" exclaimed George Duke to Zed Summers. "I'd hardly expected to find you here!"

"Me either," said Holliday. "I expect, Summers, you've let the cat out of the bag. You've taken the edge off the surprise we was cookin' up for Miss Hackstaff."

"I'm doin' what I think best," replied Zed.

George Duke tossed his hat on the floor. He was plainly disappointed and made no effort to conceal it.

THE two visitors found chairs and sat down rather stiffly. There was a painful silence that lasted for a long minute, and then the storekeeper found his tongue.

"Dolly," began Nels, "me an' George have come out here on a kinda painful errand. It'll probably hurt you at first, but, in the long run, it'll be the best thing that ever happened to you. Me an' Duke spent last night in Ashford Springs. We've just come from there, ridin' hard to tell you. Dolly, last evenin' Bill Medberry was arrested for the murder of your dad. He was jailed. Durin' the night he made his escape. He's on the loose now."

As the storekeeper had been speaking, Zed Summers had kept his eyes on the girl, and she, too, had been watching him. Something of what was in the deputy's mind must have been conveyed to her, for she stifled a scream as though the news were a complete surprise, looked wild-eyed, and simulated the astonishment that she did not feel.

"It's an infernal shame!" whispered Holliday. "I'd rather have taken a beatin' than to have told you. But the idea is this: Chances are a hundred to one that Bill'll find his way out here an' try an' play on your sympathies. That's what we wanted to caution you about. If you harbor him or aid him in his escape, you'll be guilty of a felony whether Bill's proven guilty or not. An' a felony, even for a woman, means the penitentiary."

Dolly Hackstaff was wiping tears from her blue eyes. Zed saw that they were not synthetic tears either, but were born of a grief that threatened to consume her.

There was another painful silence, and then George Duke got to his feet.

"Summers," he said, "I may have given you the wrong impression by what I said when I saw you sittin' here. Mebbe me an' Nels have been sort of childish about this. But our

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wish to return the diamonds to Dolly ourselves was an honest wish, even if it was kinda boyish. I can see now why you've come to her. Her father's death and the robbery are so linked up together—I'm sorry that——"

He held out his hand, and Zed took it.

"No hard feelings, Duke. Naturally you were disappointed. If I was in your shoes, I'm sure I'd be, too."

"That goes for me, likewise," put in Holliday. "It's only reasonable that we give you a free hand."

Dolly then thanked both men for what they'd intended to do for her and thanked them, also, for coming and telling her about Bill Medberry. She was on her feet now, indicating as best she could that she wished they would bestir themselves and ride away. Presently they took the hint and got their hats.

"Me an' Nels," Duke told the girl, "aren't ridin' in the sheriff's posse. We're public-spirited citizens an' all that, but our only wish is that Bill gets plumb out of the country. Personally we don't think he had anything more to do with it than the man in the moon. We want you to understand that."

"That's generous of you," answered Dolly. "Of course, he didn't."

The two men went out then, mounted their horses, and rode away.

Dolly was looking intently at the deputy. "You've found out anything since you came here, Mr. Summers? Anything at all?"

Zed faintly smiled. "It's the most interesting job I've ever tackled."

"What's to be done with Bill?" she gasped. "We can't let them catch him."

Zed was considering that when, for the second time, there came the thunder of approaching hoofs. Both he and the girl started at the sound. There must be at least a dozen horsemen, judging from the racket they were raising. The deputy started for the back door but, realizing that it was too late to escape, stopped and looked out a window. Even as he looked, the horsemen surrounded the cottage on all sides. At their head rode Sheriff Peterson of Ashford Springs.

"It's the sheriff," cried the girl. "Poor Bill!"

Zed stopped her with a motion of his hand.

"They haven't found him yet. My rough guess is that this time I'm the one that's elected. Peterson's probably already deduced, or some one's told him, that it was me who turned Bill loose."

"They'll jail you!" moaned Dolly.

"We'll see," whispered Zed, as the faintest of smiles puckered his thin lips.

Sheriff Peterson was already pounding on the front door with the stout butt of his six-gun.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CROOKED TRAIL.

"THAT star toter ain't very long on manners" said Zed Summers, as the pounding on the door continued. "Listen, Dolly. When you let 'em in, refer to me as Blondy. I'm a wanderin' cowhand lookin' for a job. You have no idea where Bill is, but you know that he's been arrested. Understand?"

"I do," said the girl, as her face paled. She ran to the door then and flung it open.

Sheriff Peterson and three of his posse men came crowding in.

"Where's Bill Medberry?" roared the sheriff. "He's hidin' here!"

"He's not!" gasped Dolly.

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"Search the house, boys!" directed the lawman. "Every foot of it! Pass the word outside to give the ranch buildin's the once-over." Then, for the first time, Peterson seemed to become aware that Zed Summers was standing there beside the girl. His right hand made a dive for his gun.

"Leave the iron be!" quickly put in Zed. "If I'd wanted any of that, I'd have drew on you when you came through the doorway. You wouldn't have stood a chance, either."

The sheriff's hand dropped to his side. "You're submittin', then, to arrest?"

"Arrest!" exclaimed the deputy. "What under the sun are you talkin' about?"

"You turned Bill Medberry loose! You may be a slick one, but I can read you like a book. First you befriended him in the saloon, an' then —— You're a wanted man, Blondy. I'm arrestin' you on suspicion!"

"Aw, you're havin' a nightmare."

Slowly Zed was edging over toward a window. A moment now an' he would have his back to it. There was nothing to do but make a break unless he could talk the sheriff out of the predicament he was in. The posse men were making considerable noise and confusion as they tramped through the cottage looking for the missing cowboy.

"Well, what are you doin' here then?" demanded Peterson.

"Lookin' for a job."

"You got one job already. Honest John Danford's hired you for a bouncer."

Zed had moved a foot nearer to the window. "A man's got a right to have two jobs, ain't he?"

"What you doin' inside the house? It ain't natural for Dolly to have let you in—not if you're a perfect stranger to her."

The deputy forced a chuckle. "Your massive brain's beginnin' to function, Peterson. So happened I craved a hand-out. She was preparin' grub for me. Invited me to step inside."

The sheriff snorted. He called then to a member of the posse who was in the kitchen: "Oh, Trask! Any sign of fodder bein' cooked out there?"

"Naw!" yelled Trask. "The stove's cold!"

"How about it, Dolly?" demanded Peterson, as he turned upon the girl. "Are you part an' party to this lyin' that's goin' on?"

"Strong words, sheriff," put in Zed, as he moved still closer to the window.

Molly Hackstaff mumbled something under her breath, but her words were unintelligible. Then she did something that thrilled Zed Summers to the core. As though divining what was in the deputy's mind, she had stepped between him and the sheriff. Zed did not hesitate. He spun on his heels, lowered his head. Propelled by his powerful legs, he plunged headlong through the closed window. There was a crash of glass. The pane shattered into a thousand fragments before the human avalanche that hit it.

Zed turned over in mid-air as he cleared the window. It was a rolling dive. He struck the ground first with his hunched shoulders, rolled all the way over and landed on his feet. A six-gun roared inside the house. There were shouts and smothered curses, the tramp of hurried feet.

"After him!" yelled Peterson. "Let him have it!"

Zed sprang up running. He

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dodged behind a tree. A man came running out from behind the house. A gun flashed in his hand. He fired. The slug went wild. The deputy did not slacken his pace. He swung around in a circle and headed for the gully. Men were coming out of the feed barn and the bunk house. There was danger they might cut him off. He increased his pace. Three or four men were firing from the cottage. Slugs zipped around him, beat up the dust ahead. One of them went through his battered Stetson. He could feel it distinctly. Forthwith he began to zigzag.

Joy came to him as he saw Bill Medberry directly ahead. The cowboy had come up out of the brush at the sound of the firing.

"The horses!" yelled Zed.

"Got 'em!" called Bill. He disappeared then down behind the cut bank.

There was a momentary lull in the firing from the rear.

"Mount up, you fools!" Peterson was yelling. "Ride him down! There's Medberry!"

"Bad!" thought Zed. "He mightn't follow me very far but he'll follow Bill from here to Halifax."

There was another burst of fire, this time from the men who were trying to cut him off. Zed reached the edge of the gully just as a slug sent his boot heel flying. There below him stood his horse, rump toward him, the reins draped over the saddle horn. Medberry was already mounted. The deputy made a flying leap and landed in the saddle. No sooner had he touched leather than the sorrel was running.

"The creek bottom!" called the cowboy. "That'll be best!"

"Take the lead!" ordered Zed. He slowed his mount and let Bill pass him on his roan.

Madly they rode down the gully, the clatter of their horses' hoofs drowning out all other sounds. Zed glanced over his shoulder. Before they'd done three hundred yards, mounted men appeared on the cut bank of the wash. There was a momentary delay as they searched for a spot where they could slide their horses down. Two of them made it safely. Then Zed's view was blotted out as he and his companion raced around a bend in the arroyo.

The gully was rapidly broadening out, the banks falling away and offering but scant concealment. Ten minutes and they had left the wash behind them and were out in the open, were riding over gentle, partly wooded ground that sloped to the eastward. Medberry's roan was no match for Zed's sorrel; continually he had to slow down to keep from overrunning the cowboy. Shortly they mounted a rise. Once more Zed glanced back. The burly figure of Sheriff Peterson was just emerging from the mouth of the arroyo. Three members of the posse rode close behind him.

"This won't ever do," muttered Zed. "We're no more than holdin' our own. The buzzards may even be gainin' on us."

They topped the rise, dropped down the other side of it, the sorrel and the roan gaining momentum on the steep down grade. A miniature valley lay there before them. Farther down and to the right were a clump of head-high boulders. The cowboy was heading directly across the draw.

"Not that way!" yelled Zed.

He forged ahead then and took the lead, turned right when they were in the bottom of the draw, and continued down it. Once beyond the knot of boulders he drew rein and stopped, the horse quivering beneath him. Medberry wonderingly

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drew up. Brush and scrub pine sprinkled the east slope of the little valley.

"Up the side now at a walk," directed the deputy, "an' we'll see if we can't keep under cover while we're doin' it. Take it easy."

He forced the sorrel through the fringe of brush and toward the higher ground. Alternately he glanced both ahead and back up the canyon. They had gone no more than half the distance to the summit when Sheriff Peterson and his human bloodhounds put in their appearance. They came thundering down the valley in single file.

"Stop now, Bill," ordered Zed. "Dismount." With a quick movement of his leg he was out of the saddle, the cowboy following his example. They crouched down in the brush. The horses were at least partially concealed. If they could be kept from moving, there was a chance they would not be noticed.

Zed held his breath as he watched the oncoming horsemen. Satisfaction came as he saw that Peterson was not hesitating, was swerving neither to the right nor left. The posse, now somewhat bunched up, rode by the clump of boulders. They continued on down the draw.

"They was in too much of a hurry." Zed chuckled. "They've overrode our trail. It may be three or four minutes before they notice that there's no hoof marks ahead of 'em. Come on! It's our turn now to hurry!"

They mounted then and pushed the horses up over the rise, without thought of further concealment. But they still lacked some fifty feet of the summit when a shot rang out from down below. It was a laggard member of the posse who had fired it, a man, poorly mounted, who had been trailing along behind and had not yet passed the boulders.

"Which complicates matters," thought the deputy. "Peterson'll be back-trailin' now when he hears the gunfire."

The man fired again and set up a shout of triumph. Both of his slugs had gone wild. He continued to pull trigger as the two fugitives disappeared over the top of the ridge.

"Missed us!" growled Bill Medberry. "Blast them bloodthirsty jaspers! We can't keep this up forever. My horse won't stand it!"

"We're better off now than we were when we started!" called Zed. "Things are gettin' better all the time. Quit worryin' an' follow me."

"You act as though you enjoyed it!"

Zed was enjoying it. He headed at an oblique angle down the slope and when he came to the bottom of it, turned left. Then he did a surprising thing; he headed back in the general direction of the 3 Bar 4. A quarter of a mile and they were up on the ridge that they had previously crossed, but were now going in the opposite direction. Some distance more they rode and paused to listen and to let the horses breathe. From down the valley came the sound of gunfire, a volley of it.

"Mebbe the posse's shootin' at each other," suggested Bill.

Zed cocked his head and listened more intently. "'Tain't that. They thought they saw us. Peterson's picked up the trail again, an' he's comin' fast."

He touched the sorrel in the flanks. Having followed many men during his life, he had come to know just how fugitives from the law instinctively acted when pursuit was close behind them. He took advantage of that knowledge now by doing just the opposite. Uphill and

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down he and Bill Medberry rode, and the trail they traveled was as crooked as a piece of sun-dried rawhide. Three hours they kept steadily at it, and then Zed decided that they'd had enough. He drew rein in a semicircular formation of boulders that were clustered on a hogback. For a half hour they stood listening some distance from their more or less exhausted mounts, but no sounds came to them except the usual noises of the woodlands.

"The sheriff don't look much like an Apache," the deputy said. "An' he'd have to be two Apaches to follow the trail that I've laid out for him. How far is it to the creek, son?"

"Not over five miles. There's water there, plenty of grass an' tules. A man could hole himself up there for a long time."

"Good!" snapped Zed. "We're headin' for the creek."

The five miles passed beneath them without incident. They saw nothing of either the sheriff or the members of his posse. They pushed their way through the tules and young cottonwoods and came to a shady, grass-covered patch of ground.

"I'm beginnin' to wonder," announced Medberry, as he slid off his horse, "what we've come here for, anyway? We can't do anything for Dolly while we're camped here like a couple of blanket stiffs."

"Only one of us is goin' to be camped here," Zed told him, "an' that's you. If anything's to be done for Dolly, I'll have to do it. Your object in life from now on is to keep out of the clutches of the law. My rough guess is that you'll have your hands full doin' it. An' *don't* go near the 3 Bar 4. Peterson'll have the outfit watched, an' Dolly's got enough to worry about without worryin' about you."

"I can't sit idly by——" objected Medberry.

"You'll have to. I'm ridin' for Ashford Springs. Sooner or later I'll come back for you, but until I do, you stay here."

"The sheriff'll gather you in if you go to town."

"That's for me to worry about," said Zed. "Peterson won't touch me if Honest John Danford can prevent it, an' I think he can. I'll be disappointed in him if he can't."

Once more he made the cowboy promise that he would remain among the tules. Then Zed mounted and rode off down the creek toward Ashford Springs.

"Diamonds! Diamonds!" he muttered. "Who's got the diamonds?" Dolefully he shook his head as his barrel of a chest shook with silent laughter.

CHAPTER VII.

MURDER AT ASHFORD SPRINGS.

ZED SUMMERS purposely took his time on that ride to Ashford Springs. For one thing his horse needed the rest. It was dark when he arrived there, but a skyful of stars gave sufficient light so that he could see what he was doing. He came into the town at right angles to the main street and headed for the rear of Nels Holliday's general store. There were things he had in mind to talk over with the storekeeper, and Holliday's bachelor cottage, which was some distance to the rear of the store, would make a handy retreat in case things suddenly got too hot for him in Ashford Springs.

He spotted the cottage and, leaving his sorrel tied to a sapling a hundred yards away, walked toward it.

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Yellow light came from two of the windows. The shades were tightly drawn. He passed through a gate and came up to the side of the house near one of the windows. Loud talking, between two men, was going on inside. He couldn't make out what was being said; evidently the men were in a room on the opposite side of the house. He listened for a moment, trying to distinguish who they were by the sound of the voices, but failed.

There was nothing to do but make a half circuit of the house and come in on the other side. Zed moved around toward the front, feeling his way along the wall. He had just reached the corner when there came the muffled roar of a gun from inside the house. It was instantly followed by a bloodcurdling scream. Then came the crash of glass and the sound of a heavy object hitting the ground, on the opposite side of the house, with a dull thud.

Instantly he raced across the front of the building and got to the other side just in time to see a man picking himself up off the ground. Evidently the man had come through the window, carrying the glass before him. The fellow was on his feet in an instant and running toward the main street of the town. Twenty feet and the darkness had completely swallowed him.

Just as the man disappeared from sight, the front door of the cottage opened. Zed turned around at the sound. A man stood there plainly visible in the shaft of yellow light that came from the doorway. He was moaning dismally and clutching frantically at the door for support. Suddenly the fellow's knees buckled beneath him, and he fell headlong.

Zed sprang up to the low veranda. The man had fallen face downward. Quickly the deputy turned him over. It was Nels Holliday, the storekeeper! There was a jagged wound in his throat; his life's blood was spurting from it.

"Quick!" gasped Zed. "The man's name who shot you?"

"The diamonds," whispered Holliday. "He has 'em."

"The name—the name!" repeated Zed, as he held his ear to the dying storekeeper's lips.

"Poor Dolly——" breathed Nels, and those were the last words he ever uttered.

Zed Summers could hear men shouting now out on the main street of the town. A moment and they would be there; evidently both the shot and the scream had been heard and both would be speedily investigated. Already he could hear the sound of swiftly running footsteps. There was nothing more that he could do for Holliday so Zed quickly bounded off the veranda, raced across the yard, vaulted over the fence, and took a position behind it where he could see what was going on from the shelter of a shrub.

NO sooner was he in position than the first man to arrive at the scene came up on the veranda and stood there in the light that came from the doorway. It was Honest John Danford!

"Huh," grunted Zed. "Honest John wasn't in his saloon when the shot was fired. If he had been, he never would have heard it. An' if somebody had gone in an' told him about it, he'd have been among the last to get here instead of the first. A high-class killer would be actin' just like he's actin'—returnin' to the scene an' makin' a great fuss about it."

Danford was on his hands and knees beside the fallen man. Ten

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seconds and a dozen men had crowded around the saloon keeper. Zed recognized three of them as men he'd spotted in the saloon who would bear watching. In addition there was Slim Mattoon, the gunman guard. Sheriff Peterson was not in evidence, which would seem to indicate that he was still out with his posse scouring the valley to the north. Other than ejaculations of surprise and half-spoken curses, nothing that the men on the veranda said carried as far as the fence, behind which Zed was concealed. He listened patiently, but no scrap of the information that he sought came to him.

Presently the dead man was carried into the house. Men began coming and going then, tramping in and out. A seemingly endless procession of them. Zed got rather weary watching this procession of the morbidly curious but finally he was rewarded by seeing Honest John Danford come out and walk away, presumably bound for his barroom. Danford was carrying a rather bulky object in his arm that had been wrapped in a newspaper.

Zed promptly quit his post by the fence, got his horse from the sapling, and rode a semicircle around Ashford Springs. This time he approached through the high brush that came up to within a hundred feet of Honest John's saloon. Once more leaving his horse, the deputy sauntered up to the open back door. Half-drunken miners and cowmen were drifting in and out; Zed stopped one of them and asked the man to tell Danford to come to his office.

"Tell him Blondy wants to see him. He'll understand. Go ahead now, an' some day I'll buy you a drink."

The man disappeared into the barroom.

Zed backed away from the door and waited until he saw Danford come into the hallway. Then, pulling his hat down over his eyes, he quickly stepped inside. A moment and he and the saloon keeper were alone, the office door closed behind them. Danford stood with his back against his desk, facing Zed. He seemed uncertain, ill at ease, and doubtful as to what would happen. Zed Summers had never felt more at ease in his life.

"There's a disappointed look in your eyes, Danford," he said.

"Disappointment's right," answered Honest John. "Blondy, you ain't going to be much use to me. I'm payin' you a week's wages an' lettin' you go before you even start to work."

"Keep the wages," said the deputy, "an' tell me what's the matter."

"Your lettin' Bill Medberry out of the cooler, an' then helpin' him to escape when the sheriff had him cornered, destroyed your usefulness as far as I'm concerned. A couple of Peterson's posse men drifted in an hour or so ago an' told me. The sheriff'll be lookin' for you; he's lookin' for you now. Naturally you can't work here. Don't get sore about it, but naturally you can't."

Zed winked at him. "Mebbe you can fix that up with the sheriff. My impression is that he comes pretty nearly doin' what you want him to do."

Honest John shook his head. "You're like everybody else, Blondy. You persist in gettin' my business wrong. I run a straight house here, that is, as straight as any gamblin' house ever was. Nothin' to boast about, maybe, but I don't have to stoop to bribin' the law. Even if I

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am Peterson's friend, I wouldn't ask him to pass you by."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Zed. "All you want to do is to get rid of me—to ease me out without makin' trouble for yourself. Why don't you be honest about it?"

Danford shrugged his shoulders and straightened up. "There's no use arguin' with you, I reckon. The less we say to each other, the less liable we are to regret it."

Zed resolved to continue with his prodding and see what it would fetch him. "It wasn't by any accident that I came here to Ashford Springs, Danford. There's somethin' in the wind here that ought to net a man who can handle it a pretty penny. I make reference to some diamonds that were stolen from a man named Jim Hackstaff."

"Oh," sighed Danford, "I thought that's what was coming."

"Diamonds," repeated Zed. "A fistful of 'em! It might be possible, Honest John, for you an' me to get those stones. If you want to put in with me, we'll split the plunder fifty-fifty. That'll make a tidy sum for each of us. You know your way around in this town, you know the people, their habits, reputations. You must have gathered a sight of information out there in that barroom, an' with eighty thousand in your jeans you could plumb forget about this gamblin' business."

Beads of perspiration stood out on Danford's brow.

"My only possible interest in the diamonds," he slowly said, "would be to return them to Dolly Hackstaff."

"You're pretendin' to be burdened down with morals, ain't you?" Zed sneered. "It don't seem to sit so well with the rest of you." Then he abruptly changed the subject. "There's a package behind you on the desk, Danford, wrapped up in newspaper. I crave to see what's in it."

Honest John's face turned a shade paler. "Don't know that it'd interest you. It's just a shotgun."

"Unwrap it," interrupted Zed. "An' while you're doin' it, forget that you've got a gun under either armpit. A draw would be a fatal thing for you to do."

"I've no intention of drawin'," declared the saloon keeper.

He walked halfway around the desk and quickly removed the paper from the package. It was a ten-gauge, double-barreled gun that had been taken apart, that is, the barrels removed from the stock.

"How'd you come by it?" asked Zed.

"It belonged to Nels Holliday until an hour ago," said Honest John. "Nels's dead now an' won't have any further use for it. So happens I've always wanted a gun like this. An', strange as it may seem to you," evenly continued Danford, "I intend to pay for it. When Holliday's estate is settled, I'll pay whatever it's worth."

The saloon keeper's eyes were beady, and what looked like fear rested heavily upon him. There was no sound in the little room except his rather labored breathing and the distant buzz of conversation that came from the barroom.

Silence for a long minute and then Zed said:

"Last evenin', mister, you told me that I was a cool one. Shucks! I can't even hold a candle to you. Danford, you know where those diamonds are! I want 'em."

"You're mistaken," answered Danford. "I *don't* know where they are."

"That's a lie!"

The saloon keeper shook his head.

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"If I knew where they were, Dolly Hackstaff would have them now."

"A likely yarn!" snorted Zed. "Listen—if it would make the difference between your living and dying, would you give me half of them?"

"Life's sweet to anybody. But if I gave you half, you'd want the other half. I've seen men like you before. If I gave you *all* of them, you'd blot me out to cover up the trail. No chance, Blondy. An', anyway, I haven't got 'em."

"You won't talk then?"

"I've nothin' to talk about, fella. But I wish you'd never heard of Ashford Springs. It was a bad night for me when you first came through them batwing doors. You've had me fooled, but I might have known."

Zed's eyes narrowed. "I'm giving you one more chance, Danford."

"One or a dozen—the answer would be the same. The long an' the short of it is, Blondy, that as far as I'm concerned, you can do anything that pleases you. You've got the drop. I've always been somethin' of a fatalist. If my cards have been dealt, I reckon there's nothin' I can do about it."

"There's always ways to make a man talk," hoarsely whispered Zed Summers. "If I was to tell you that it was *you* who killed Nels Holliday to-night an' that I had it in mind to turn you over to the law, what then would you say?"

"I would say that you were mistaken. What would you expect me to say?"

SUDDENLY there came a lusty rap on the door. Danford's mouth opened, but the deputy motioned him to silence.

"You're wanted out in front, John!" called out a voice that sounded as though it belonged to Slim Mattoon. "Gent to see you!"

"Me an' Honest John are busy!" answered Zed. "But we'll be out in a minute!"

"O. K." Footfalls faded away down the hall, as the man returned to the barroom.

Zed instantly knew that he must decide at once upon a course of action. He'd gone much too far with Danford to let him go. If they were to separate and meet again, it could mean nothing but flaming six-guns in the hands of both of them. Zed wouldn't have minded that so much, but he was thinking of that which had been stolen. There was little to be gained if the saloon keeper died with the secret locked in his brain.

"There's dust on the side of your coat, Honest John," suddenly said Zed. "You look as though you'd rolled in it."

"I stumbled an' fell when I was runnin' down to Holliday's house a while ago. Guess I overlooked brushin' some of it off."

"You fell through a window," prompted Zed.

"What window are you talkin' about?"

"Never mind." Zed's left hand had slipped down to his six-gun, a movement so quickly done that no eye could have followed it. The Colt was held on a level with his hip. "You're ridin' with me, Danford! Don't squawk about it, because it wouldn't do you any good. This is no place for me to make you speak your piece. We'll be interrupted here within the next two, three minutes. Turn around! Your hands above your head."

"All right," assented Honest John, as he did as he'd been told. "I know when I'm licked. But you can't get blood out of a turnip."

The deputy took the guns from Danford's shoulder holsters and

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slipped them into his own hip pockets.

"Bring your arms down," he directed, "an' cross your wrists behind the small of your back."

Handcuffs jingled in Zed's hand and were promptly snapped around the saloon keeper's wrists. No sooner was the job done than there came another thump on the door.

"What's the matter with you, Danford?" yelled Slim Mattoon. "If you don't answer, I'll knock the door down!"

"Tell him you're all right," whispered Zed.

Honest John smiled. "You're runnin' the show, fella. Not me. Tell him yourself. Tell him anything you want to. Better hurry. He's gettin' ready to bust the door in."

Zed promptly spun the saloon keeper around and grabbed him by the throat. His fingers sunk into the soft flesh like bands of iron.

"There's another way out of this room besides the door!" Zed hissed. "There has to be. As slick a gent as you would never be holed up here like a rat!"

"You win again," gasped Danford. "That calendar there on the wall. Knock it off. There's a latch——"

The deputy crossed the room in two leaps. He brushed aside the calendar. Embedded in a board was a metal catch. He pulled on it. A three-foot section of the wall moved out and revealed the beginning of a dark passageway. Just at that instant Mattoon's body came hurtling against the outside of the door. The room shook under the impact, but the door still held. Danford was moving toward it, when Zed reached him and grabbed him by the arm. He forced the saloon keeper across the room and through the opening in the wall.

Mattoon hit the door again. This time he was successful. The lock broke. The door flew open. Slim Mattoon recovered his equilibrium instantly. A six-gun flashed in his hand. Zed Summers hesitated for the barest fraction of a second. He could kill this man with a quick shot. His gun came out then. It roared as it moved. But Mattoon was unharmed. The gunman's Colt was torn from his hand and went spinning across the hall. Silence had come to the saloon, followed in a split second by the stamp of feet.

Zed still held Danford in his grasp with the fingers of his left hand.

"Lead the way out!" he ordered. "If you make a mistake about it, you'll never make another!"

Danford started running down the passageway that paralleled the side wall of the saloon. Light from the office partly illuminated it. It was narrow, high-walled, ran for some fifty feet and terminated in a door.

"There's a spring lock," called out the saloon keeper, as he stepped aside. "Open it!"

Zed snapped the lock and threw the door open. He stepped out, Danford ahead of him, and found that he was in the back yard of the saloon. To his left was the rear door that was used by the public. The moon had not yet come up, the night was still black. Men were tumbling out through the rear door of the barroom; everything was mad confusion.

Honest John Danford ran willingly enough beside the deputy. They streaked it for the brush and the sorrel. A moment and the horse was there before them. Zed untied the animal and walked it, together with his prisoner, another hundred yards into the undergrowth. Here he stopped and untied the sorrel.

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"Lie down on the ground, Danford. I'm tyin' you up."

"No need to do that."

"Won't be for long. Shut up now an' do as I say."

Swiftly the deputy worked. A moment and the saloon keeper's legs had been bound and a bandanna had been tied securely over his mouth so that he could make no outcry.

"Be back shortly," Zed said, and walked off into the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

HONEST JOHN CALLS A BLUFF.

THE hunt for the missing Danford had already begun but it was a half-hearted sort of hunt; perhaps Slim Mattoon was the only man there who cared a great deal as to what had happened to his employer. In the dim light Zed could see men coming out through the secret passageway, laughing and joking with one another at having discovered it. Those men might patronize Honest John, might lose their money to him, but they would never defend him at any risk to themselves. Fundamentally they despised him and loathed his business and would rejoice at any evil that befell him. Yet they would, in the next breath, greet him as one friend might greet another.

Zed spent a busy two hours in Ashford Springs, moving here and there in the darkness with all the agility and disappearing qualities of a ghost. The excitement in the saloon died down. When he returned to where he had left Danford, the deputy was leading a saddled pinto that he had surreptitiously taken from the livery barn. In the pinto's stall he had left a hurriedly written note assuring the stableman that the animal would be returned.

Honest John still lay upon the ground. Zed took off the gag and untied the thongs that bound the man's feet but he did not remove the handcuffs.

"We're ridin'," he announced. "I'm findin' a place to work you over. If you want to go along peaceable, you an' me'll get along fine. If you want to make a break, I'll hit you on the head an' tie you on the pinto like you was a sack of oats."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Honest John.

Zed helped him into the saddle, for he was awkward with his hands behind him. Just as they rode away, the moon came up. The deputy led the pinto by the reins, rode at a steady pace through the night, first south, then west, then north. An hour and they were riding parallel and at no great distance from the road that ran up the valley.

Suddenly Zed drew up as his keen ears caught the clatter of hoofs on the hard-packed roadway.

"Mebbe Peterson's comin' back," suggested Danford.

"Won't do you any good," returned Zed, as he pulled the saloon man's horse into the shadow of a tree and took refuge there himself. "But you're wrong, as usual. Those gents are headin' *away* from Ashford Springs, not toward it. An' they're comin' fast."

"My mistake," sighed Honest John. "I never was much good at directions. You've got me all turned around."

The little cavalcade came swiftly up the road. There were six of them, one solitary rider riding well ahead of the others, who were bunched behind.

"George Duke an' his men," whispered the saloon keeper. "Must be headin' for home. Duke's mighty

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much cut up over what happened to his friend to-night."

The horsemen speedily disappeared in a cloud of dust that showed quite plainly in the silvery moonlight. Zed and his prisoner once more took up their journey, cutting farther and farther to the east as they rode along.

The deputy had no difficulty in finding the spot on the low creek bank where he had left Bill Medberry. As he pushed his way through the tules, he heard no sound whatever. Having in mind not to startle Medberry by bursting in upon him, he called his name, but there was no answer. He came out into the clearing by the bank, but there was nothing there.

"Must 'a' got loose." Honest John chuckled.

"He wasn't tied. But the fool promised me——"

They dismounted, and Zed unsaddled the horses and tied them where the grass was good. Then he moved the saloon keeper's hands around in front of him so that he could lie down with some comfort. Danford's feet were once more bound together.

"You're a queer one, Blondy," said Honest John, as he lay upon his back. "Twice and more I've seen you act uncommonly much like a white man. The other night in the saloon you had every reason for shootin' Bill Medberry. You didn't. To-night, with death starin' you in the face, you deliberately shot the gun from Slim Mattoon's hand instead of pluggin' him. I saw it. You let Bill out of jail an' brought him here where he'd be safe. Do you know what conclusion I've come to, fella?"

"Couldn't imagine," said Zed.

"It's this: I ain't in any more physical danger from you than I'd be from my own son."

"Remarkable," Zed replied. "But there's ways of turnin' on the pressure that haven't anything to do with beatin' a man. Hunger—thirst—the more refined forms of torture."

Honest John shivered.

"I get you," he said, with a sigh. "Do you know, Blondy, you ain't even a distant cousin of what you pretend to be? You're no hoot-owl rider, but if you was, you'd make an infernally good one. You've packed the star. Mebbe you're still packin' it."

"Forget it," interrupted Zed. "I'm sleepy."

"If you ever find those diamonds," continued Danford, "I know what you'll do with 'em."

"Well, what would I do with 'em?"

"You'll give 'em back to Dolly Hackstaff, Blondy—just like I would."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHERIFF FINDS HIS MEN.

FIVE o'clock in the morning and Zed Summers was up and around preparing breakfast from the few odds and ends of provisions that still remained in his saddlebags. He released Honest John's legs but did not remove the handcuffs.

Danford began moving around through the brush that surrounded the camp site.

"I'm enjoyin' this business, Blondy," he said. "Don't think I'm tryin' to run off. First time I've been out in the good, clean air for the devil of a while. It's great to smell the grass an' the good dirt. Hello! What's this?"

The saloon keeper had picked up a sheet of paper from the ground. There was a hole in it where it had been suspended from a twig, but

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evidently the wind had blown the paper loose and it had fluttered to the ground. Zed walked up and snatched it away from Honest John's handcuffed hands but not before the saloon keeper had had ample time to give it a searching and a piercing glance.

The deputy read to himself:

ZED SUMMERS: Couldn't stand it just sitting here and doing nothing. I don't reckon you'll be back here before to-morrow morning, but if you do come, this note'll tell you where I've gone. I'll be back myself, come sunup. Couldn't resist the temptation to drift over to the 3 Bar 4 and see how Dolly's coming. I'm worried about that girl—her being there alone. I won't try and see her personally, I'll just see if she's all right. Kinda sneak around and find out. Don't think I'm too much of a flathead for not following your orders, but I reckon you've never been in love. Be seeing you, and thanks for everything.

Your friend,
BILL MEDBERRY.

"Shucks!" Zed exclaimed softly as he finished reading. "But I don't know as I blame Bill much at that."

Danford's face was wreathed in smiles. "I sure got an eyeful of that note, too, Blondy. It's written to you, an' your name stands out there in the first line as though it was printed in box-car letters. 'Zed Summers'! Now I *know* I've got nothin' to fear from you!"

"Callin' my bluff completely, are you?" muttered Zed. "But merely because you know who I am doesn't alter our relationship at all. The accusing finger still points, and when the time comes for you to talk, you'll talk. You'd be surprised if—"

"You've never done an innocent man wrong in your life," interrupted Danford. "I've known men who knew you, men that you've been after. It's just too bad for a man if he's guilty—but I ain't."

Honest John sat down on the ground and despite the handicap of having his hands bound together, ate the frugal breakfast that had been prepared for him with great gusto.

"What were you doin' in Nels Holliday's house last night?" suddenly asked Zed. "You were in there before the fatal shot was fired. You were there when it *was* fired."

Danford's face blanched, but he was saved from making an answer by the sound of a horse coming through the brush at no great distance away. Both men were instantly on their feet; Zed's fingers gripped the butts of his six-guns.

"It's Medberry," he presently muttered. "The wanderer's returned."

SHORTLY the cowboy came out into the clearing on foot and saw the two men standing there. Zed noticed that Medberry had secured a gun while at the 3 Bar 4. He hesitated at the sight of Honest John and looked wonderingly at the handcuffs.

"Danford's my guest," said Zed. "What are you smilin' about?"

"Good news," answered Bill. "Looks like that everything was go-in' to be cleared up."

"Go on," prompted Zed. "What's happened?"

"I came up to the 3 Bar 4 pretty late last night," began Medberry. "The men were asleep, an' there wasn't any light in the ranch cottage. I eased up to the house an' thought I'd wake Dolly up. I knocked on her bedroom window an' spoke her name a dozen times, but she didn't answer. This looked kind of funny, so I went around and opened one of the sitting-room windows and climbed in. This was foolish because I found out afterwards

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that the front door was unlocked. There was plenty of light from the moon so that I could see. I called Dolly again, an' this time she couldn't have helped but hear me. The house was empty!"

"Apparently it didn't worry you," exclaimed Zed. "Come on; let's have it."

"On the table in the living room," continued the cowboy, "an' propped up against the lamp was a letter addressed to you. The address was in Dolly's handwritin'. I thought it might be somethin' important that you oughta hear about right away so I took the liberty of openin' the envelope. I'm glad I did, because it's sure took a big load off my chest."

Bill Medberry passed over the letter then, and the deputy, stepping away from the two men, eagerly read it:

DEAR ZED SUMMERS: It looks as though my trouble regarding the diamonds is about over. A Mexican boy has just brought a note from an unnamed man explaining what I am to do to get them back. I am leaving now to follow those instructions and am writing this letter so if you come to the 3 Bar 4 you'll know where I've gone and will wait for me here until I come back.

The letter writer explained that he is not the man who robbed and murdered my father and burned up the ranch house, but that he has the diamonds now in his possession and wants to get rid of them because he can find no safe market for them. I guess his conscience is troubling him. Perhaps he *is* the man who murdered dad but, of course, he couldn't be expected to confess it.

Anyhow, I'm to ride immediately up into the hills to the Lost Dog Mine where he will be waiting for me to give me the diamonds. He won't wait for long because he's going to skip the country. Says there's a man hunter in the valley who's making the trail too hot for him. No matter what happens, my father could not be brought back to life. I'll let the thought of punishing the killer pass for the moment and try and save the 3 Bar 4 from foreclosure which I know is what dad would have wanted me to do. Of course, I'm to go alone. To take a man with me would spoil everything. Be sure and wait for me at the ranch. I'll be back just as soon as I can.

Sincerely yours,
DOLLY HACKSTAFF.

Zed was grinding his teeth as he finished with the reading. "Where's the original letter?" he asked the cowboy. "The one the Mexican boy took to the ranch."

"Search me," replied the cowboy. "I suppose Dolly has it. What's the matter, Summers? You look as though you were goin' to have a fit."

The deputy's face was dark with both fear and anger. "So you think, Bill," he snorted, "that this buzzard who's dealin' with Dolly is on the level! You're a sucker for fallin' for such a yarn! Consider what he's told her. He says he can't find a market for the diamonds. That's a lie! There's any number of places that would be worth goin' to with that much plunder—Kansas City, Denver, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles. If he wanted to give the stones back to her, why didn't he send 'em with the Mexican boy or come to the ranch an' drop 'em on the front porch. There's a thousand ways he could have returned the stuff that would have been safer for him than having Dolly come up to the mine.

"He evidently talks about his conscience hurting him. Fiddle! A bird like him hasn't got a conscience. It's a cock-an'-bull story, pure an' simple! I can't blame Dolly for fallin' for it, but you've been around enough so that you hadn't ought to have swallowed it——"

"What are you tryin' to say?" gasped Medberry.

"Just this," continued Zed Sum-

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mers, "that either there's another murder in the wind or something worse. An' this time Dolly Hackstaff's goin' to be the victim! I doubt if this man has the diamonds. It's just a trick to trap the girl. Still, he has a reason for it."

Bill groaned aloud and started for his horse.

"Zed's right," put in Danford. "I don't know exactly what you're talkin' about but I'm sure he's right."

"You know where this Lost Dog Mine is, Bill?" called Zed.

"You're darn right I do—an' it's a long day's ride! No chance of overtakin' Dolly, but we can try! You an' me can make it before sunset."

"I'm goin', too," said Honest John. "I can ride, an' I got a good horse."

"Nothin' doin!" growled Zed. "I'm tyin' you up and leavin' you here."

Danford's face was hard, and his eyes were snapping. "You've no right to do that, Summers. I'm a man, ain't I? It's my right. The right of any man."

The deputy shook his head. "I can't be bothered with you."

"Not even if I'll agree to confess to the murder of Nels Holliday? I'll make that agreement with you, with Bill Medberry, here, as my witness."

"You'd go that far," whispered Zed, as his eyes narrowed, "just to go along?"

"I will," answered Honest John. "I will, because years ago I knew—Dolly Hackstaff's mother."

THE three men mounted then and rode west as rapidly as their horses would carry them, Bill Medberry setting both the pace and direction. Two miles of this and Zed Summers drew rein.

"We'll have to use our heads, gents, or we'll be afoot long before we get there. We'll have to nurse our mounts along an' not ride the hind legs off 'em." He turned to the cowboy: "You're takin' the shortest way, Bill?"

"I am. An' it's goin' to run us right through the 3 Bar 4 in broad daylight. But we can stay out of sight in the gulch that you an' me rode down once before."

"All right," interrupted Zed. "I know the way."

He took the lead then and set a steady, mile-eating pace that brought them into the entrance to the gully long before the sun had crossed the meridian. Danford's wrists were still encircled by the bracelets; he had asked the deputy repeatedly to take them off.

"I'm still lookin' for the diamonds," muttered Zed. "I don't imagine I'll find 'em at the mine. Who knows where I'll find 'em? That'll have to be your answer, Danford."

One behind the other they rode up the crooked, narrow defile, the saloon keeper in the middle, Zed leading. He heard a cow bawl and knew that they were not far from the ranch headquarters. He pulled his sorrel down to a walk, and the horses following crowded close up behind him. A moment and they rounded a bend.

Zed bit an oath in two. There in the path before him and not twenty feet away stood Sheriff Peterson! He had a cocked six-gun in either hand. The deputy was looking down into their black muzzles.

"Up with 'em!" rasped Peterson. "All three of you! I got you covered! At the first sign of a move, I'll shoot!"

The deputy's hands went up, and so did those of his two companions. Honest John's handcuffs clinked to-

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gether with a metallic sound. Their horses had stopped as Peterson had spoken.

"Leave us go by," said Zed. "We're in a hurry. Life or death lays at the end of our trail. We've got no time to loiter."

"Now if that isn't an asinine remark!" growled the sheriff. "You've got no time to loiter! Whoever heard of the like? You're headin' for the lockup—all three of you! Medberry for murder, you for helpin' him to escape, an' Honest John for bein' in bad company. I been waitin' here. Knew that sooner or later you'd come back to the spot from which I'd chased you away. A crook always does that. Always comes——"

"We crave to pass on," repeated Zed, "but if you're goin' to be mulish about it, I suppose we'll have to humor you. What do you want us to do?"

"Get down an' line up there against the cut bank. An' don't make the mistake of lowerin' your hands either. You gents are agile enough to climb down without the use of your arms. All right now. One at a time. Blondy, you come first."

Zed swung his right leg over the saddle and was on the ground. Just how he was going to handle the sheriff, the deputy hadn't yet decided. He didn't want to hurt the man, but time was passing fast and they had precious little of it. Honest John climbed off his pinto, and young Medberry likewise dismounted. They lined up beneath the cut bank.

"What you got the shackles on for?" asked the sheriff of the saloon keeper.

"I'm bein' robbed." Danford chuckled. "These gents are holdin' me for ransom. It's a darn lucky thing for me, Peterson, that you happened along. You've not only saved my life but all the money I've saved in Ashford Springs."

BILL MEDBERRY, his face red, had started to interrupt, but Zed had kicked the cowboy's shins with his boot and kept him quiet.

"Darn my soul!" hoarsely whispered Peterson. "Danford, I'm sorry now I spoke about jailin' you for keepin' bad company like I done. It'll be you an' me that'll take these skunks to town."

Honest John, his face a shade paler, stepped away from the cut bank then and approached the sheriff.

"Don't step between me an' them polecats!" quickly cautioned Peterson. "I ain't disarmed 'em yet."

"My mistake," said Danford, as he stepped aside. Two seconds and he was standing beside the lawman. "These things are darn uncomfortable," he grumbled, as he shook the handcuffs above his head.

The sheriff was not watching him; his eyes were on the two men lined against the cut bank. Honest John half smiled and acted instantly. With all the speed of a flashing shadow he brought his bowed arms down over the sheriff's shoulders. Peterson's arms were pinioned to his sides. He dropped one of his guns. Struggled frantically——

Zed Summers, divining what was going to happen, had gathered himself for a spring even before the saloon keeper's arms had started moving. The instant Danford's arms came down, Zed jumped away from the cut bank. Three quick strides and he had his arms around the struggling sheriff. Peterson went over backward. The tussle was short and decisive. A moment and

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the sheriff staggered to his feet, disarmed and livid with anger.

"This is your fault, Danford! Danford, you're a double-crossin' rat!"

"Shut up, Peterson!" ordered Zed. "An' listen to me. When I'm done talkin', I'll give you sixty seconds to make up your mind. If you wanta behave yourself an' ride with me, that's O. K. an' we'll be glad to have you. If you don't wanta do that, we'll tie you up an' leave you here."

He then quickly told where Dolly had gone alone and of the letter that she'd received. The sheriff was asked to imagine what would happen to the girl.

"The skunk must be lyin' to her," said Peterson, as he cooled down. "I'll tell you what I will do. I'll declare a truce. You gents can be my posse. I was waitin' here alone. The rest of the boys deserted me an' drifted back to town. Just a lot of softies. Couldn't stand a little ridin'. The truce'll last until we've found out what's happened to Dolly. After that, I'll do my duty."

"Well spoken," muttered the deputy, "an' I know you'll keep your word. I like you, Peterson, even if I have had to make a monkey out of you once or twice."

"Who are you, anyway?" inquired the sheriff. "You know how to carry yourself——"

"Doesn't matter." Zed turned then to the saloon keeper and held out his hand. "Danford, no matter what you are or what you've been, you're pretty decent. You just had your chance to get away. There's only one thing stood between you an' freedom—the thought of a girl somewhere up there in those hills ahead. You claim to have known her mother——"

"I did," said Honest John.

Quickly the deputy removed the handcuffs from Danford's wrists. Then he returned the saloon keeper's guns to their empty holsters. Without another word the four men mounted and rode up the gully toward the mountains to the west.

CHAPTER X.

SHOW-DOWN.

ZED SUMMERS nursed his posse along with the maximum of speed and the minimum of effort. Long years in the saddle had taught him many things, and the chief of these was patience. Peterson gave him his greatest concern; the sheriff was forever rushing ahead taking chances of an ambush that there was no sense in taking.

The afternoon wore on, and, under Bill Medberry's directions, they were well up in the brush-covered foothills.

"Ain't so far now," said the cowboy, as they paused a moment to rest the horses. "Twice I been to that Lost Dog Mine. Ain't much of it remains. Just a shack over the rusty hoistin' machinery."

They mounted and rode on.

"There've been people this way ahead of us," said Zed as he pointed to the ground. "Not one or two, but mebbe as many as a half dozen of 'em. An' the tracks all lead in one direction."

"Looks bad," said Peterson. "This is a long way from any ranch an' no cattle country at all. Dry as a bone. The water's all down below. What would they be doin' up here?" The sheriff suddenly had forged ahead.

"Take it easy," cautioned Zed, but Peterson gave no heed to the warning.

They passed out of a draw and into a flat, boulder-strewn coulee.

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On the opposite side of the little basin the draw continued, but turned sharply to the left.

"Ain't over a quarter of a mile," whispered Medberry to Zed. "It's just around that bend."

Honest John was practicing drawing his twin guns from his shoulder holsters, a thing which he had been intermittently doing all afternoon.

Two minutes and they were halfway across the basin.

"No use makin' a direct approach," advised the deputy. "Move over to the right among them rocks an' we'll skirt the wall of the coulee an' leave our horses there."

Bill and the saloon keeper took his advice. But Peterson kept right on ahead and even increased his pace. Sixty seconds and there came the sharp bark of a rifle. Zed, Danford, and the cowboy were instantly on the ground.

Peterson let out a yell. He swayed in the saddle, as his horse stopped moving. He clutched frantically at the horn with one hand and at his throat with the other. Then he plunged head downward and fell to the ground. A second following the rifle shot, there came the high-pitched scream of a woman's voice.

"That's Dolly!" hoarsely whispered Medberry. "I know her voice."

The cry had come from some distance away, and from the direction of the mine. Then a man shouted:

"I got him, boys! Right between the eyes! It was Peterson! There's more of 'em comin'!"

Two or three men answered him, answered with oaths of satisfaction.

"Stay where you are," directed Zed to his companions. "I'll see if anything can be done for Peterson."

He crawled off on his hands and knees through the brush and rocks toward the spot where the sheriff had fallen. The man with the rifle then fired again and again, but his bullets went wild; evidently he had found nothing definite to shoot at.

A moment and Zed reached the sheriff. But Peterson was already dead, probably had been dead even before he'd hit the ground. He was a victim of his own bullheadedness.

"Not a bad man," thought Zed. "He meant well but just didn't savvy. An' his two guns in action would have come in mighty handy to us."

THE deputy promptly went back through the brush the way he'd come and told Medberry and the saloon keeper what had happened. The cowboy was on his knees, drawing a bead on something up the draw, but the deputy forced his gun down.

"Not yet, kid. We'll stay under cover just as long as we can. Get as close as we can an' hold our fire until we have to turn it loose. You gents just keep your shirts on an' follow me."

Doubled up, he led the way through the maze of brush and boulders to the side of the coulee. The bank ran up for a good ten feet. They followed along beneath it; the entrance to the draw was not far away. The man with the rifle was once more yelling at his companions, and, from the sounds that carried through the still air, Zed judged that men were coming down to join him at the entrance to the draw.

Once again the girl screamed, but her cry was instantly shut off. It was no stretch of the imagination to tell how the matter had been handled.

Medberry was swearing under his breath and likewise the saloon keeper.

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"I can't stand this much longer," growled Honest John. "I gotta do somethin'."

"We'll rush 'em when I give the word," whispered Zed Summers. "There'll be plenty to do then."

The wall of the coulee was gradually falling away, places of concealment becoming harder and harder to find. The brush thinned out. The entrance to the draw was plainly visible.

"All right," said Zed as he crouched behind a boulder. "Jump up when I do an' run like the devil. Don't bunch up together. If you see anything to shoot at, shoot. But don't waste your shells. When we get through the entrance, find somethin' to hide behind. We're ready to——"

Zed's legs unwound like springs. He hurtled the boulder and tore up through the draw, a gun in each hand. Medberry and Danford were on either side of him. Instinctively they began to zigzag as they ran. No sooner were they on their feet than a burst of fire had greeted them.

"Four or five gents waitin' for us," thought the deputy. His guns blazed at a puff of smoke among the brush. The draw no sooner turned to the left than it began to widen. Up ahead and against the low wall of a cliff was the peak of a dilapidated roof. The mine! Medberry and Honest John were both pulling triggers. The men they were attacking were retreating before them; running through the brush like a lot of rabbits, their guns blazing as they momentarily stopped and turned around.

"Run for the mine!" one of them shouted.

"Yellowbellies!" growled Zed.

A moment and the deputy and his two companions were in the undergrowth that surrounded the abandoned hoist house. They flopped to the ground at the beginning of the slope that led up to it.

"Recognize any of the skunks, Bill?" asked the deputy.

"Naw," panted Medberry. "I didn't get a good enough look."

"We'll spread out now an' go up the slope," continued Zed.

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than a fresh burst of fire came from above. Slugs ripped through the brush. Medberry emptied his gun and then reloaded.

"Hey, you gents!" roared a voice. "Pull out an' we'll turn the girl loose as soon as you're gone!"

"Don't listen to 'em," breathed Zed. "They're naturally liars. All right, now. We'll get goin'. I'll take the center. One of you men get on either side of me. Hug the ground. Hold your fire until you've got somethin' to shoot at."

MEDBERRY and Danford began crawling off, one to the right, the other to the left. Zed began wriggling his way up the slight rise, keeping ahead of both of them.

"Well, how about it?" once more shouted the voice from the shack. "Speak up, or we'll let you have it!"

A moment's pause and then the narrow draw echoed and reëchoed to the drum of gunfire. Slugs ripped through the undergrowth like a swarm of bees, whined dismally as they hit rocks and ricocheted. Zed got to his knees. The brush was thinning out. Much to his dismay he saw that the shaft house stood in a little clearing. That meant there would be a cleared space forty or fifty feet in width to be crossed before they could reach it.

He looked to the right. Danford was pointing toward the shack and

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plainly indicating that he was anxious to rush on. A glance to the right told the deputy that that was what was in young Medberry's mind, also. "Nervy fellows," thought Zed. "All three of us will never get there alive, an' they know it."

Blue gun smoke was drifting from cracks and knot holes in the weather-beaten hoist house and from the wide-open door. The hail of lead still continued. Zed Summers half got up. The others did likewise. He saw that they were ready. They were all three poised there for a second. Then, simultaneously, they sprang into action.

Luck was with them for an instant, as the deputy had planned it would be. He had timed his movement to coincide with the instant when the men in the shack would have emptied their guns. It would take at least some of them an appreciable time to reload.

The firing slackened as Zed dashed into the clearing. Medberry and Honest John emerged from the brush at the same split second. They converged upon the door of the hoist house, running as fast as they could, guns blazing. Many times before, Zed had faced a stream of lead, but never anything like this. The men had completed their reloading. The roar of exploding powder was deafening. Shouts! Curses! Everything was mad confusion. Through the fog of smoke he saw the doorway before him. Was conscious that the cowboy and Danford were beside him. The three of them were heading for the door. Went through it, Danford slightly in the lead.

"Hoist 'em!" yelled the deputy, more by instinct than by reason.

More stabs of flame in the dim light. Honest John was falling. The fire slackened. Zed made out the hoisting machinery in the center of the room. There was a man behind it. Zed fired just as the man fired. Then the hammer of his Colt snapped down, and no sound came. The gun was empty. He hurled it at the man just as the fellow began to fall.

Comparative silence came at that instant. There were no sounds but the groans of dying men and muttered curses. The smoke was rapidly clearing away. But two men remained upright in that room of death, Bill Medberry and the deputy.

"Dolly! Dolly!" yelled Bill, but there was no answer.

It was Zed who found the girl. She lay against the rear wall, tied hand and foot and with a red bandanna covering her face. Zed cut the cords and yanked off the bandanna. The girl staggered to her feet and then into the waiting arms of the cowboy.

THE deputy's roving eyes took in the situation at a glance. Five men lay stretched out upon the floor. The first three he came to would never rise again; they were strangers to him. The fourth man had fallen, face downward. Zed turned him over. It was George Duke, the owner of the Circle C! There was still some life in him; his eyelids fluttered uncertainly. In his outstretched hand he tightly clutched a buckskin poke. The deputy took it from his fingers, untied the cord, and glanced inside. There were diamonds there! Diamonds that sparkled with a myriad of varicolored lights. No fewer than a hundred stones.

"Huh," grunted Zed. "Duke, what a fine fellow to work for you've turned out to be!"

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He left the rancher and hurried to the door where Danford lay. The saloon keeper's face was the color of ashes, and the death rattle was already in his throat.

"Dolly!" gasped Honest John.

"She's safe an' unharmed," whispered Zed, "an' the credit goes to you. You were the first man through the door, my friend."

" 'My friend'," repeated Danford. "Nice to hear you say that, Summers. You got me all wrong at first. It's my face, the way I look that fooled you. Before comin' to Ashford Springs two years ago, I oughta have been hung. I've tried to be an honest man since comin'! Never quite succeeded. Dolly—when I found she lived there—I turned over a new leaf. I loved her mother, but she'd had enough sense not to marry me. Dolly—the picture of her mother. It wasn't me that shot Holliday. I was at his house, though, lookin' for the diamonds—I'd looked everywhere for 'em. I'd just got into the house when the shot was fired. I went out again—that's why I was the first to get there."

"I've got the stones," said Zed. "George Duke had 'em. It was him an' his men."

A smile passed over Honest John's white face. "Fine, son. That's fine. Don't ever let anybody tell Dolly that I knew her maw—she might think ill of her. But her mother wasn't to blame—wasn't to blame because I loved her."

Danford said no more. His eyes closed. A shudder passed over him, and he was dead.

Dolly Hackstaff gave a cry of fright. Zed Summers got up then from the floor where he had been kneeling and saw that George Duke, his eyes glassy, had half raised himself on one elbow and was looking stupidly into the empty palm of his hand.

"My diamonds!" he moaned. "They're gone!"

"I have them," said the deputy as he stood over the rancher, "an' they'll be returned to their rightful owner. It's a crooked trail you've ridden, Duke, with death an' dishonor at the end of it."

Duke groaned and sank down upon the floor, a curse upon his lips.

"He was making plans to ship me below the border," put in the girl. "He was afraid I knew too much. It was him who sent the note by the Mexican."

"A crooked trail," repeated Zed Summers, "that could have no ending but a noose or its equivalent. It was you, Duke, who tortured Jim Hackstaff, robbed and murdered him. It couldn't have been any other. You thought you were safe then, but there was an honest storekeeper who lived in Ashford Springs by the name of Nels Holliday. Holliday's love for Dolly was an honest love, and he had not been embittered by her refusal to marry him. You, too, had paid court to the girl and been refused. Nels went to you and proposed that between you you hire me to come here and find the stones. He wanted to help the girl out of her difficulty.

"You couldn't very well turn Holliday down, but there were ways that you could prevent me doing anything. By killing me, for instance. Your first try at that was the ambush in Gun Sight Pass. I was supposed to die, but you miscalculated. You left footprints there in the dust on the road, purposely left them. The boots you wore that day weren't your boots! They belonged to Nels Holliday. He was wearing them the next day when I met you an' him in Rattle-

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snake Wash, and naturally I suspected him of the ambush. Then you wanted me to make my headquarters on the Circle C. I wouldn't have lasted there overnight. It was more luck than management that I missed it.

"The trail runs swiftly, Duke. You continued to play your cards. I had the ten-gauge shotgun that had been used in the ambush. You naturally wanted to get it out of the way so you stole it from my horse in the livery barn and tried once more to ambush me in the darkness of the night. You failed again. Then you planted the gun in Nels Holliday's house so that if it was ever found the suspicion would point at him. Honest John found it. In the meantime you must have got suspicious of Nels and fearful of the things he might find out. Heaven alone knows what went on between you, but you killed him. I know because you left your footprint in some flour that had been spilled in the kitchen. You're wearing those same boots now. You didn't have the nerve to come running back to Nels's house with the others and to pretend to be surprised."

George Duke groaned and rolled over on his back. Hatred shone there in his bloodshot eyes.

"You're a devil, Summers——"

"Not half as much a one as you are," answered Zed. "You tried to cast suspicion right and left. Peterson told me this afternoon it was you who swore out the warrant for Bill Medberry's arrest. You offered him good money not to tell, but he told. You had in mind a necktie party for the cowboy, but I turned him loose. All I had to do was keep the pot boiling. I made one mistake. I misread Honest John. I'm sorry——"

"It's gettin' dark——" mumbled the Circle C rancher.

"You're going away," whispered the deputy, "on a journey that'll have no end. Perhaps there's something you would like to say that would ease your conscience."

"Guilty——" breathed Duke, and then a moment later added: "I'll curse every mother's son of you—with——" He never finished the sentence. A shudder passed over him, and so he died.

Three days and Ashford Springs turned out to the last man and woman for the combined funerals of Sheriff Peterson and Honest John Danford. Twenty-four hours later and a selected few of them attended the wedding of Bill Medberry and Dolly Hackstaff. Zed was urged by all concerned to tarry there in the valley for as long as it might suit him. But this job was done. Another task awaited. That night he rode for Colorado.

SOFT-SHELLED EGG COVERS HARD ONE

A RECENT occurrence has caused John G. Kitchen, of Eureka, Nevada, to ponder over evidence of abundant productiveness of one of his prize hens.

While engaged in the routine of collecting the gifts of his feathered friends, he was puzzled on finding an egg with a soft shell which was much larger than any he had previously gathered. On closer examination he was amazed at discovering that the soft shell contained a normal egg and between its hard shell and the soft outer covering of the original egg a large amount of egg white was contained.

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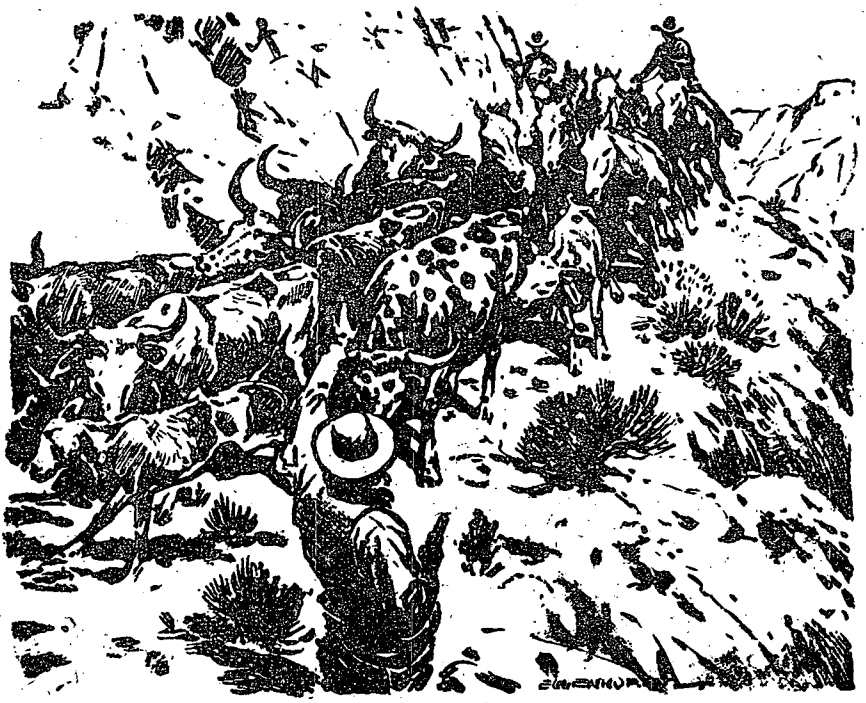

Raiding Rustlers

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Author of "Uneasy Money," etc.

THE three husky, broad-shouldered gentlemen in the big Stetson hats were sitting stiffly, in a semi-circle, glaring at the perspiring Sheriff Joe Cook, in the latter's office in Monte Vista, when Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" McKay strode in, whistling merrily.

"Oh, excuse me!" exclaimed Shorty, stopping abruptly as he recognized the distinguished callers. "I'm sorry I busted in here like this. I didn't know there was a confab on, gents. I'll get out of here."

"Wait a minute, Shorty!" cut in the distressed Sheriff Cook hastily. "You might as well be in on this. Mr. Henry May of the Bar B, and Mr. Dave Rosner of the Lazy J, and Mr. Ike Mellman of the Diamond A ranches are here complaining about that Bitter Valley bunch of rustlers again. They've run off a lot of stock in the past few days. We got to drop just everything else, Shorty, and concentrate on them rustlers; We have got to hide out and wait for 'em——"

"Why wait?" exclaimed Henry May angrily. He pounded the sheriff's desk with a huge clenched fist. "Why not assume the defensive? Go after 'em and get 'em! Don't hide——"

There was an answering fire in

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Sheriff Cook's eyes now. And he proceeded to give the desk a few good thuds. And when he spoke, his voice was like the belligerent bellow of an outraged range bull.

"Go after 'em, you say, May? You know blamed blasted well why I can't go after 'em! It isn't my fault if you and Rosner and Mellman here, and a dozen other Monte Vista ranchers have ranches bordering the Meadow County line! It isn't my fault if Meadow County has a smart-Aleck sheriff who is dog-gone jealous of his territorial rights! It isn't my fault if that Bitter Valley gang always pulls a fast raid and skips over the county line before we even hear about the damage until they're safe beyond my bailiwick?"

"It seems," thundered Rosner, "that you could get together with the Meadow County sheriff and arrange to handle the situation! I think——"

Sheriff Cook jumped to his feet. He pointed a finger at Rosner.

"You're not thinking when you say that!" cried Cook hoarsely. "You should know, if you don't, that the Meadow County sheriff isn't smart even if he is a smart-Aleck! He thinks he can catch that gang. But he has no experience. He's a former teamster. He'll never catch them. And he won't allow no interference from me, either. Can't you see my position, gentlemen?"

Mellman jumped up, kicking over his chair.

"All I got to say, Cook, is that you had better produce results or else the Consolidated Cattlemen's Association will sure get a new sheriff in Monte Vista!" threatened Mellman, his face flushing. "If you can't offend another sheriff, who may be goofy, and have to sit by and see *your* citizens robbed, then I say it is time to get new blood in this office!"

Sheriff Cook choked with rage. He faced Mellman furiously.

"If you think I'm going to jump over my county line, into a backyard that isn't mine, getting myself all tangled up in legal red tape, you're just plumb crazy, Mellman!" exploded the sheriff. "I'll not do it."

"I will!" spoke up Shorty excitedly. "I'll jump the line!"

"Good for you, kid!" shouted Rosner wildly.

"Go to it, Shorty!" yelled Henry May.

"Atta boy, Shorty!" whooped Mellman, in relief.

"I'm not afraid of hurting any sheriff's feelings by chasing a mob of outlaws into his territory. I'll do it!"

AGAIN Sheriff Cook choked. But this time he really choked. His face went scarlet. He seemed about to faint. He grabbed a chair for support. He then appeared to be about to speak, to say things, to shout things. But he didn't, after all. He restrained himself with an apparent effort. He just stood there, swaying, as the three cattlemen slapped Shorty on the back and said nice things to him. Then, with hardly a glance at the overcome Cook, the three cattle barons turned and stalked out of the office.

"Sit down, boss, before you fall down!" suggested the exuberant Shorty.

"Sit down before I kick you out of those chaps, out of the office, out of town, out of the county, you mean!" blazed the irate Cook, shaking a menacing fist at Shorty. "What do you mean, making a wild boast like that? You think you can become sheriff, maybe, after I'm

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booted out of office by that selfish cattlemen's organization? You got another think coming. I'm going to fire you now—forthwith, as the legal papers say. You get——"

"Wait a second!" interposed Shorty. "I was only trying to help you. I'll get those rustlers if I have to chase them clean into Montana! The devil with county lines, State lines. I'll go into Old Mexico——"

If Shorty sought to soothe his chief, he blundered badly.

"You'll stay in this county, you halfwit!" declared Cook, seizing Shorty by both shoulders and forcing him down into a chair. "The day has passed when a deputy sheriff, or a sheriff, can run hog-wild over vast acres. The law coddles the criminal now, as you and every other law-enforcement officer realizes. We can't make a legal pinch in Meadow County. All we can do is lay in wait and ambush that handsome lot of desperadoes on one of their forays into our yard. In time we'll nail 'em."

Sheriff Cook's tone softened as he saw the injured look on Shorty's long face. After all, he knew, Shorty was as loyal as they made them.

"I'm kind of sorry I blew up on you, Shorty!" went on Cook quietly. "But them cattle barons had me mad before you came in. Nope, I know you aren't after my job. But your youthful ambition makes you blind, sometimes, to insurmountable barriers. Our county lines might as well be the Alps. We can't cross 'em. We'll have to play a waiting game, Shorty."

Shorty toyed with his hat. He appeared crushed.

"You mean I can't even chase 'em, if I see 'em, over the line?"

"I mean that!" said Cook. "I don't want you to cross the line under any circumstances. I'll not have the governor publicly scolding me for overreaching. You get me—you're not to put a foot on Meadow County soil!

Shorty looked up suddenly. He cocked his head to one side.

"What was that? I'm not to put a foot on Meadow County soil, boss?"

"Precisely!" said Cook slowly. "You understand that, Shorty. You're not to tread one foot on the soil of Meadow County. Them's orders!"

Shorty pushed his sombrero back on his forehead.

"Have we any hot business on for this afternoon, boss?" he asked.

"Hot business?" echoed Sheriff Cook, giving Shorty a suspicious look. "What do you mean? We've got to get going on this rustler proposition!"

"Oh, sure," agreed Shorty cordially. "But—you see, well, I've bought me a little bunch of cattle, boss. I thought of going into the cow biz on a small scale. I figured I might get 'em settled on the range this afternoon if you didn't mind. It'll only take a couple of hours."

Sheriff Cook was too tired to say all he might have said.

"You a cattleman?" he cried, aghast, it seemed, at the thought. "How are you going to run cattle while you've got this job? How are——"

"I've hired a man to do that," said Shorty complacently. He got to his feet warily. "If you don't mind, boss, I'll step out for a few minutes. I'll be back shortly. Then I'll be all set to help——"

Shorty went through the door hurriedly as if he expected a curt order to remain. But Sheriff Cook was too exhausted to fight further. He sat and watched Shorty depart

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without a word. After all, he decided, life was too short to battle constantly. And besides, he had to figure out a plan to ambush the rustlers. He could do that much better with Shorty out of the way. The sheriff settled back for a long siege of heavy thinking.

WHEN Shorty returned, several hours later, he wore a satisfied smile. He found Sheriff Cook in better spirits, too. The sheriff, with a sheaf of paper and a worn-down pencil, had completed his plans, it appeared. He even condescended to give his deputy a friendly nod.

"Well, Shorty, I've got the campaign all mapped out and I think I've done a neat job of figuring," said the sheriff. He pushed a piece of paper toward Shorty. "Cast your eyes on that, son. See this X mark here, at the trail at the Little Buzzard and Blue Mesa creeks? That's where we'll go into camp to await developments. That's the place I chose for the ambush, and I'll tell you why. You follow me close now."

Sheriff Cook licked his lead pencil carefully.

"If the rustlers snatch any critters off the Bendemeer rancho, they'll have to come up Blue Mesa Creek. won't they? Good! The same holds good for all the ranches along the Blue—the Phipps place, the Swanson place, the Troutdale ranch, the Brookforest outfit, the Evergreen Rancho. Any one of those places should be ripe right now for a rusetlers' raid. Now take the isolated ranches along Little Buzzard. There's a number of them. Any stock run off them places and headed quick for Meadow County must come up to the junction. And there we are! I couldn't have picked a sweller place for an ambush. We'll squat out there, ready and waiting, and——"

Shorty looked thoughtful.

"If I was suggesting a camp for an ambush point, I'd say to go up along the sandstone ridges west of the place you picked," he offered softly. "Cattle can be rushed across there by men who really know the country. I think we'd do better——"

Sheriff Cook put a sudden stop to Shorty's thinking.

"We'll camp where I say; I've thought it all out fine," said Cook. "Nobody but a fool would try to get cattle through the sandstones in a rush. Your idea is no good. Now, we want to start at sunset."

Shorty nodded thoughtfully. Then he grinned.

"Boss, you got a minute to come over to the pens and take a fast squint at my stuff I bought?" he asked, a little shyly, it seemed. "I'd like you to see my cattle. It'll take just a minute!"

The sheriff's curiosity was aroused. He felt generous, too.

"Well, O. K., I'll look," he agreed finally. "Come on!"

But five minutes later the sheriff was right back in a fighting mood. He had looked into the corral Shorty had indicated, and he had grunted in mingled disgust and amazement. He instantly decided Shorty had been bilked. The bunch of cattle looked like crow bait—the assortment of cows, calves, and steers were of all the colors of the rainbow and then some, and every animal looked like it had weathered the worst drought in the history of Old Mexico. The animals were thin, dirty, undersized, anything but attractive.

"Where in blazes did you get those?" demanded Cook.

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"Picked 'em up cheap," said Shorty smugly, his blue eyes narrowed.

"If you were paid to pick 'em up, you were cheated," snapped Cook. "I swanny I've never seen such a bunch of living skeletons! And you're going to hire a man to run these? Where are you going to run them?"

"West of here a bit," said Shorty vaguely.

"You got stung," said Sheriff Cook heartily. He turned away from the corral with a shrug. "You couldn't have paid much for 'em, so you won't lose an awful lot in the end. Maybe it'll teach you to mind your own business and stay out of games you don't understand."

"Maybe so," said Shorty wistfully. "But say, boss, are you still set on that idea that I shouldn't put a foot on the soil of Meadow County? If you'd only say the word, I'd shag those outlaws——"

"I'm still set," said Sheriff Cook, scowling. "You and me are going to stay inside our own lines and wait, whether the cattlemen like it or not. I know my business. Now we're going back and get organized —we got to scare up a pack horse and a camping outfit, grub, guns, and maybe a spare saddle horse wouldn't be a bad idea. We're shoving off from here for the spot marked X at the junction of Little Buzzard and Blue Mesa creeks."

"O. K., boss!" agreed Shorty.

The arrangements were quickly completed. Shorty had no trouble in hiring a pack horse and outfit, and a spare saddle horse at the Elite barn. He brought the animals around to the office just as the sheriff had completed assembling the camping outfit. Together they packed the stuff expertly. It was only when they were both mounted that Sheriff Cook noticed that Shorty had swung an extra pair of riding boots across his saddle.

"You don't expect to attend no dance, taking that extra pair of fancy boots with you, do you?" he asked sarcastically.

But Shorty didn't answer.

ONE thing was certain about the spot the sheriff had picked for the ambush camp. It was lonely. Shorty, dismounting at the scene, decided that no one could have chosen a wilder, more primeval location for a hide-out. There was a deep, dark forest of tall pines pierced by two creeks that joined, at the edge of the timber, into one roaring torrent. Two little-used trails also converged at the point—the trails from the Little Buzzard country and the Blue Mesa region. Sheriff Cook was in jolly spirits.

"We'll put the tent well back in the timber where we won't be conspicuous," he advised happily. "We'll cut a few saplings and build a horse corral farther back. Then we sit and watch, watch and sit."

"We'll take turns watching, I suppose?" suggested Shorty sadly.

"We shall, Shorty," nodded Cook. "And the moment a bunch of strangers ride up with a bunch of cattle, we'll pop out, ready, and take 'em by surprise. If they're legitimate, we can explain. If they're crooks, they'll be captives or corpses, as they choose to take it. I have high hopes for this idea!"

Shorty nodded gloomily. From a saddlebag he produced a pair of worn field glasses. He put them to his eyes, focused them.

"Bah!" snorted Sheriff Cook disdainfully. "You carry a lot of extra luggage, Shorty! How far can you see along either winding, crooked

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trail with glasses? You can't look around curves and bends with them."

"No, but I can admire the sunsets up on Bald Peak with them!" said Shorty, turning the glasses toward the towering peak to the west of them. "I like to look at sunsets, boss—they're so quiet and peaceful!"

"Make camp!" barked Sheriff Cook gruffly.

So camp was made. It was a good camp, too, as far as makeshift camps go. It was fairly comfortable. Shorty and Cook found that out after the first twenty-four hours. It lacked just one thing—a dog. With a dog, insisted Shorty, the tedious job of watching the trails would be much lessened, because a canine lookout would bark a warning at the approach of any one. As it was, with the sheriff and Shorty taking alternate shifts, the job was monotonous. But another day and a night passed uneventfully. In the first forty-eight hours of the vigil the watchers saw but three individuals ride past, all of whom they knew to be cowhands in the up country. A few stray cattle passed, a small number of loose horses, two deer herds, a couple of elk, one cub bear, and a few representatives of various species of small game. Shorty, during daylight watches, had plenty of time to observe the ever-shifting cloud shadows on Bald Peak.

At noon, on the third day, as Shorty came out of the tent, ready to take up another four-hour watch, the sheriff yawned a greeting.

"I hope," said Cook drowsily, "that this doesn't last forever up here. We'll be doing well if we last out a whole week."

"Sitting and watching ain't my idea of catching outlaws." admitted Shorty, "but I'm getting used to it now. I'm getting as lazy as a Texas donkey! You turn in, boss, and catch a few winks of sleep."

The sheriff needed no second invitation, either. He vanished into the tent just as Shorty lifted his field glasses to take a squint at Bald Peak. The sheriff dropped down on the pine-bough bed and closed his tired eyes. How long he slept he didn't know. But he awoke with the feeling that all wasn't well, wasn't as it should be. He went up on one elbow, listening. He heard nothing.

"Shorty!"

But there was no answer. The sheriff leaped up and thrust his head through the tent flaps. There was no sign of the deputy.

"Shorty!"

Still there was no reply. With a numbled exclamation the sheriff hitched up his belt, grabbed up his hat, and stepped out into the sunlight. But it was a fading sunlight. It was late afternoon, apparently. And Shorty was gone, hide and hair!

"Now where in blazes is that yap?" asked the sheriff, aloud.

HE ran for the corral, and, as he feared, found that Shorty's horse was missing. Shorty had gone, sure enough. But where? And why? Had Shorty spotted some one passing on one of the trails and gone on a shadowing job? Had he heard something and gone to investigate? If so, when? How long had he been gone? And had some mishap befallen him? A terrible thought struck the sheriff—had Shorty been captured, taken prisoner, killed, by the outlaws? Beads of perspiration broke out on Cook's forehead.

"Of course, maybe he just got lonesome, the nitwit, and rode off for

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a rest, figuring on being back before I woke up," decided Cook.

The sheriff returned to the tent. He poked around, worried, looking for some clew that might tell the secret of Shorty's absence. He saw the field glasses on the ground. He picked them up and took a long look at Bald Peak. But the peak looked just the same as ever. The sheriff laid the glasses down with a sigh of apprehension.

"He shouldn't have gone without waking me, if it was important," he decided. "It looks bad. And what am I going to do, after all? If I wait here for him to come back, I may be losing valuable time. If I leave, I may be making a big blunder. Now, let me think."

But Fate, it seemed, had ordained that he was not to be allowed to think—at least, not right then. There was a terrific rumpus up the Little Buzzard trail. The sheriff, stiffening, swung to face that direction, and his heart seemed to leap right up in his mouth. There was a stampede, it appeared, rolling and roaring down that narrow trail. There was first a cloud of dust and the sound of muffled hoofbeats, and then, as Sheriff Cook yanked out his six-gun, there appeared five or six head of running, panting steers, then a rider of a straining, sweaty horse, then a couple of loose horses, then another rider, more cattle, more dust, and a lot of whooping and yelling. Sheriff Cook knew his duty and he did it.

"It's the rustlers, sure as shootin'!" he cried. He jumped forward, waving his big gun. "And I got to stop 'em—alone!"

He headed for the trail, shouting loudly.

"Halt—stop—in the name of the law!"

The vanguard of steers, it appeared, had no respect for the majesty of the law, the dignity of the order, or the threat of the gun, but the first of the riders, dirty-faced and breathless, started to pull rein.

"O. K., sheriff," came the shout from this man.

But Cook hardly heard the words. The sheriff, meaning to cover the first rider, saw that matters were getting decidedly more complicated every second. The Little Buzzard trail was literally raining cattle, horses, and riders. In one fleeting glance the sheriff saw nine or ten bobbing riders above the swaying backs of the cattle and loose horses! Nine or ten—and more coming!

But Cook stood his ground bravely.

"Halt!" he cried again, at the top of his lungs, hoping that the entire calvacade would hear and be impressed by the thunderous tone. "Stop in the name of the law! I say stop in the name of——"

He didn't finish. An ugly-looking old spotted cow, going by on the prod, struck him, knocking him head over heels. He rolled, managed to cling to his gun, and came up groggy but determined.

"Halt, I say!" he cried again, although everything in front of him now seemed a whirlwind of frenzied, blurred action. "I say—I say——"

A horseman came out of the dust seeming intent on riding him down.

"Don't say nothing until you catch your breath, boss!" came a shout in Shorty's familiar voice. "We got everything under control. Don't shoot, because it is necessary! It's all over but the court trials and the penitentiary sentences!"

Sheriff Cook rubbed a trembling arm across his eyes. His vision cleared.

"You, Shorty—what in blazes is all this commotion?"

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Shorty dropped from his winded horse.

"We're bringing home the bacon, boss," he cried exultantly. "In other words we're bringing back the rustlers! We nabbed 'em all, together with a big bunch of stolen stock. We're heading 'em all down past here a little ways, to that natural park where we can pitch camp where there's plenty of grass and water and firewood, and go on into Monte to-morrow!"

Sheriff Cook leaned against Shorty's horse for support.

"Ah—well—what do you mean by this 'we' stuff, Shorty?" he asked.

"Simple!" Shorty grinned, wiping his hot face. "I just planted my little bunch of stock that I showed you in Monte the other day in the sandstone country, where I figured the rustlers would strike. Then I saw to it that the fact was well advertised in Meadow County, and that the report was a bit exaggerated to the effect that the stock was all the finest, pure-bred stuff. Then I had the ranchers who had contributed all their old boneyard material to me also contribute a man or two—and I planted the posse right near the cattle, thereby putting the teeth as well as the bait in the trap. I had a signal that when the rustlers struck, one rider was to tear up Bald Peak and build a signal fire there. The trap was on the far side of Bald, but I could see the signal from here—and I saw it this afternoon!"

Sheriff Cook was recovering. The dust was clearing, too, now that the wild collection had rolled on down the trail.

"And then what, Shorty?" asked Cook.

"It was arranged that the ranch posse shag the rustlers," went on the breathless Shorty. "And that I was to head for the line forthwith. I did. The rustlers got over the line into Meadow County O. K., but we chased right after 'em and caught 'em, and headed 'em back here. After all, it doesn't make much difference where we caught the mob, seeing we caught them. The crime was committed in our county and when we make the formal arrests tonight, as I anticipate, they'll be arrested in our county!"

Sheriff Cook's face hardened. Shorty knew what was coming.

"I thought I ordered you not to leave Monte Vista County?" exploded Cook wrathfully. "I thought I said——"

"You said that I wasn't to put one foot on Meadow County soil, boss!" corrected Shorty. "Well, I didn't—I figured you'd howl if I disobeyed you. I didn't put one foot on Meadow County soil."

Shorty pulled off a boot suddenly.

"You see, this is my extra pair of boots—an extra large boot, if you'll note!" Shorty turned the boot upside down, and a lot of dark, moist earth fell from the boot. "That's Monte Vista County soil, boss. I had it in both my boots, so I wouldn't tread on Meadow County soil. You see, I figured to be like old Abdul Aziz, a Turkish sultan, who wanted to tour Europe without treading on foreign soil, so he put Turkish soil between the soles of his shoes. I just put Monte Vista soil in my boots. It was easier!"

Sheriff Cook, who was still leaning against Shorty's horse, leaned harder now, and the patient beast lost patience. It moved. The sheriff sat down suddenly, unceremoniously.

The jolt seemed to soften him. He smiled wanly.

"Well," he drawled grimly. "I

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hope your explanation, Shorty, will satisfy the sheriff of Meadow County if he complains about your trepass! As for me, seeing you really got the rustlers, I'll forgive and forget. One thing, however—if you're hanging around with that Abull Asinine, or whatever that Turk's name is, you'd better stop it. A guy that crazy can't help but be a bad influence on one who is as nutty as you are to begin with."

Shorty flipped a cigarette out of a package.

"Don't worry about old Abdul Aziz, boss," he said. "I just read about him once. He died around 1860. I really don't know him!"

A Complete Novel, "GUN-SMOKE MESA," by H. C. WIRE, in Next Week's Issue.

GOLD IN SEA WATER

RECOVERY of gold from solutions where it is present in as small amounts as one part in 4,000,000,000 was reported at San Francisco, before the meeting of the American Chemical Society by Professor William R. Caldwell of Oregon State College.

The process, Doctor Caldwell stated, makes possible rapid and accurate recovery of better than 95 per cent of gold in solution, and will be useful in removing gold from ore with a low percentage of gold content.

Since tests indicated that it was possible to recover up to 1/3,000,000th of an ounce of gold from 10.5 gallons of water, or one part in four billions, it was decided to apply the process to sea water, which is known to contain gold in very dilute quantities, the total in the world's oceans being estimated at three quadrillion dollars' worth at present market value.

Accordingly, Doctor Caldwell reported, samples were pumped from the Oregon coast and Puget Sound. The yield was from 1/1,500,000th to 1/250,000th of an ounce for each metric ton of water, which means that there is less than a tenth of a cent's worth in each ton of sea water.

It would require forty cents' worth of chemicals, Doctor Caldwell stated, to recover one one-thousandth of a cent's worth of gold.

Doctor Caldwell's process consists of adding mercuric chloride and other chemicals to the solution containing gold, forming a precipitate which settles to the bottom, where filtering, siphoning, or other methods can recover it.

Addition of lead and heating cause a minute gold bead to form. The same method can be used to recover silver dissolved or suspended in minute quantities in solutions.

Thomas Medgley, Jr., vice president of the Ethyl Gasoline Corporation, who two years ago predicted the commercial extration of gold from sea water within ten years, said that Doctor Caldwell's new method "is one of the milestones in the path of progress that eventually will lead to the commercial extraction of gold from sea water."

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Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting and True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.

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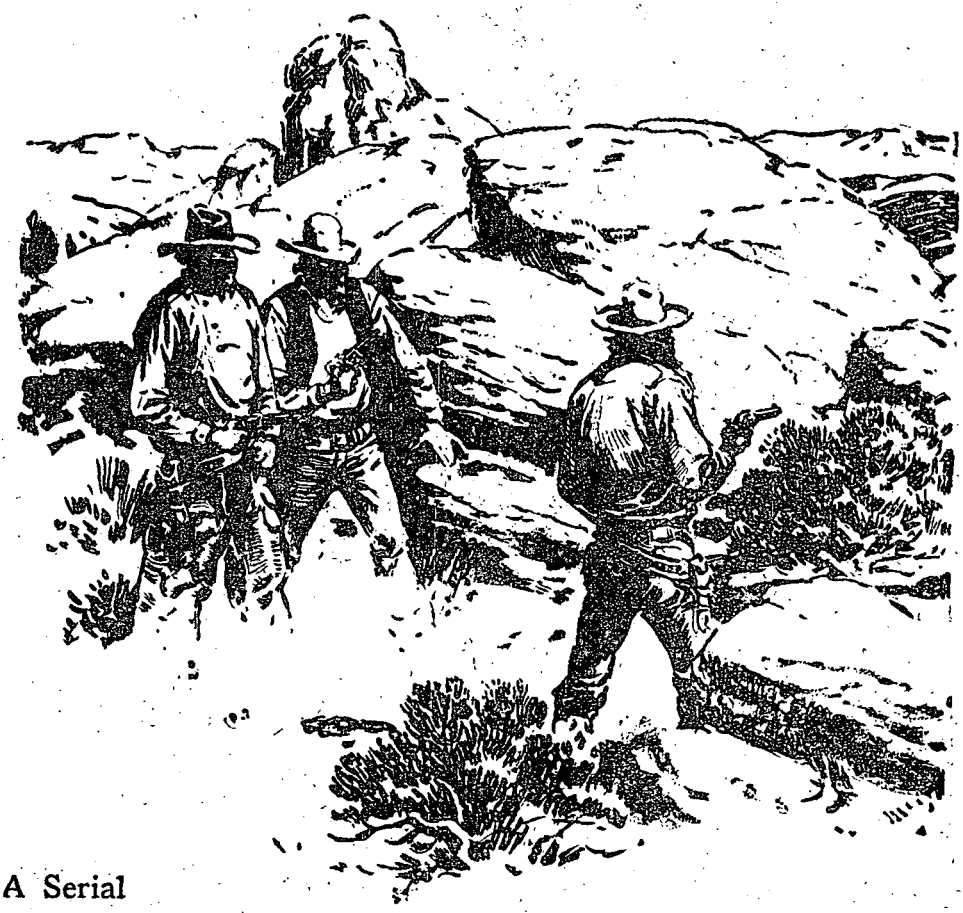

A Serial

BANDIT BRAND

CHAPTER I.

THE KID FROM TEXAS.

JETHRO HAWKINS, bending over the glowing forge in his smithy, abruptly straightened and listened. As he stood there, a magnificent giant vividly reddened by the flare of the fire, an expression of wonder caught his perspiring countenance. With a huge dirty hand he brushed back the black hair that dangled over his forehead.

"Now who in tarnation," he muttered to himself, "is that?"

It wasn't often Jethro Hawkins worked past midnight. On this occasion, however, he had promised "Doc" Fay that new springs for his buckboard would be ready by the next day, in time for the physician's rounds. So Jethro still labored, despite the fact that it was almost one in the morning.

A ponderous, leather-aproned man with the chest of a bull, Hawkins turned out of the firelight and ap-

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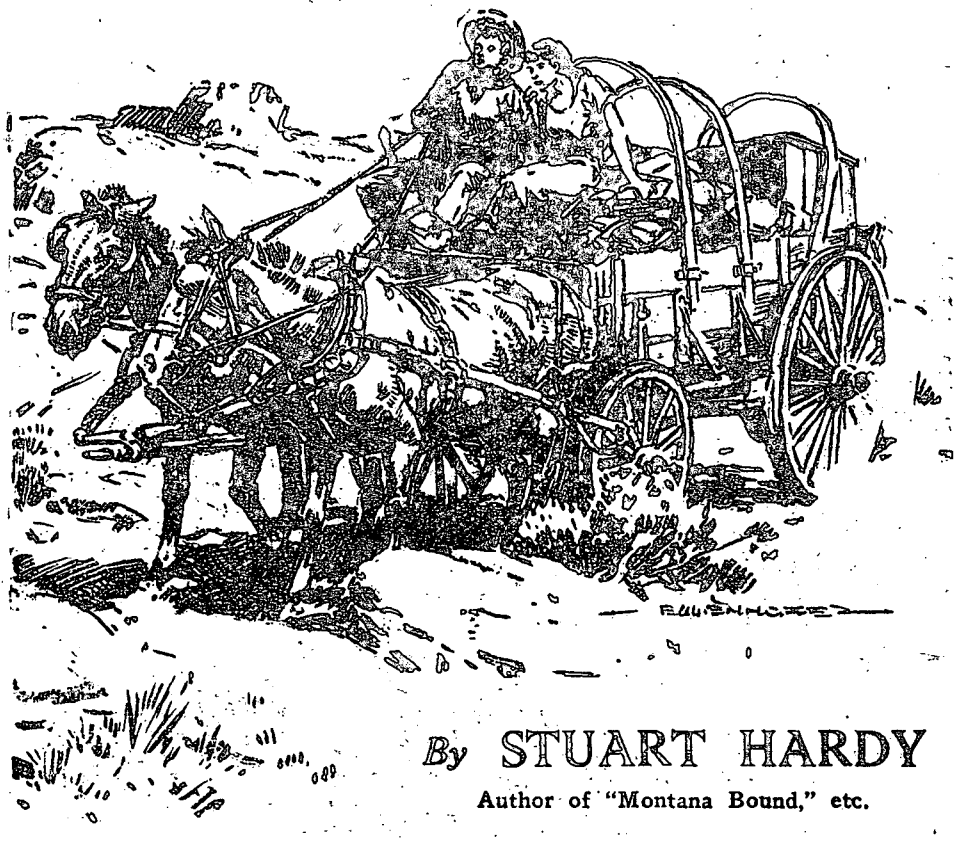

By STUART HARDY

Author of "Montana Bound," etc.

proached the door with instinctive caution. Instead of stepping into the moonlight, he thrust out only his massive head.

What he saw stifled his breath.

The smithy stood alone some fifty feet beyond the last house on Delano's only street. Peering out its entrance, Jethro Hawkins stared wide-eyed at the back door of the Delano Bank. A man was there, struggling to force the door open.

Who the fellow was, Jethro Hawkins couldn't determine. He blinked amazedly at a figure that was slim, tall, supple. Moonlight revealed a bandanna bound around the stranger's countenance to serve as a mask. Moreover, it glinted on the butt of a six-gun protruding from a holster.

Jethro Hawkins sucked in a slow breath. His fingers curled into powerful fists. The muscles of his jaws thickened into hard lumps, and a look of reckless determination, of downright outrage, illuminated his eyes.

He was a courageous man, Jethro Hawkins; imbued with the courage that rose from his consciousness of extraordinary strength. And now he had a sudden impulse to lunge at the bank bandit. What restrained him, what made him glance back over his shoulder in momentary indecision, was the realization that he had no weapon with which to oppose the stranger's six-shooter.

But as he looked around, his glance fell on the forge, on the

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white-hot iron bar thrust into the flames.

The sight brought Jethro instant inspiration.

ON his toes he hurried back. He had no sympathy for armed outlaws, or any reluctance to fight them with whatever weapon he could seize. Drawing on a heavy leather glove, Jethro grasped the cold end of the three-foot iron bar, peered for a grim instant at its white-hot tip, and started again for the door.

He could, of course, have roused the town with yells. But that would have allowed the masked bandit ample time to escape. Besides, Jethro Hawkins was not the type of man who shouted for help when he felt he could manage a situation alone.

"If I can get close enough to the coyote 'fore he hears me," he thought, "that six-gun o' his won't matter!"

Grasping the hot iron bar, Jethro stepped out of the smithy. For one of his tremendous bulk he moved toward the bank with incredible speed and silence. His toes stirred scarcely any dust.

As long as possible he remained in the shadow of the smithy's wall. He saw that he would have to cross a clear, moonlit space of some twenty-five feet. At its edge he paused to steady himself for the plunge. Ahead of him the masked man still struggled with the obstinate door, his slim back turned to the blacksmith.

"Well," grated Jethro Hawkins, "here goes!"

Crouching a little, his head lowered, he ran forward. At each step he lifted the bar higher.

His swift, soundless advance carried him to within ten feet of the bank bandit before it was heard. Then the masked figure, uttering an inarticulate cry, whirled around. Even as the man turned, his right hand yanked the six-gun from its holster.

Jethro swung his iron bar just as the weapon crashed.

The bullet ripped through his side, just above the left hip. The pain of the slash made him grimace, stagger. His first swing of the bar, missing the outlaw, clanged loudly against the bank door.

The masked man fired again.

As flame spurted from the six-gun, a second slug buried itself in Jethro Hawkins's abdomen.

Madness blazed in the blacksmith now. A thunderous bellow exploded from him. Leaping forward, eyes afire, he swung the iron bar once more.

"You skunk!" he roared. "I'll get——"

The heavy bar crashed down on the outlaw's shoulder. And its hot tip burned deep into the man's flesh!

There was a scream of insane agony. Smoke still rose from the fellow's shirt when he crashed back against the wall of the bank. Again he fired at Jethro—fired crazily, with pain blinding him. His first bullet missed, but his second stabbed the big man's thigh.

The blacksmith dropped helplessly to the ground, the iron bar slipping from his grasp, his hands clutching desperately at his abdomen.

For a moment the masked man, squirming and groaning in agony, leaned limply against the bank. His right hand rose to clutch at his left shoulder, as if to check the terrible pain of the blow and burn.

He heard yells up the street—shouts of alarm. Apparently the shots had roused all Delano. And

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hearing that uproar, he waited for no further trouble. He flung a final glare of hatred at Jethro Hawkins, now writhing in the road. But he wasted no lead on that viking figure. Instead he turned and lurched, staggering, stumbling dizzily, toward the horse he'd left under trees fifty yards behind the bank.

Jethro Hawkins raised his great head and stared drunkenly after the fugitive figure. The blacksmith was filled with pain—agony that brought perspiration trickling down his face. But a savage grin of satisfaction twisted his lips.

"Go on and run!" he panted huskily, his voice full of contempt. "Run like a yeller coyote! No matter where you go, hombre, you'll carry my brand for the rest o'—o' your life!"

A ROSEATE dawn, spilling miraculous colors across the Gila Desert, revealed a dilapidated chuck wagon creaking slowly along the desert's edge. Two mares, a roan and a bay, hauled the rumbling wagon at a steady, plodding gait. It lurched and groaned as its wheels found every rut and bump on the ancient trail; but its disconsolate progress in no way dispirited the young man and the girl on its seat.

Both of them grinned appreciatively, in frank admiration, across the kaleidoscopic desert.

In the unearthly rose light of the rising sun, shadows lay in deep-purple splotches. The sand, where it caught slanting rays, looked copper red. Here and there rock formations, flat-topped and severely right-angled, like Indian pueblos, gleamed as if they were fashioned of silver and gold.

"Sure is right pretty country!" declared the man. There was ardor in his voice, and his eyes shone happily. Ben Curtin was slim, brown-haired, brown of face. He wore a battered sombrero on the back of his head. Like the rest of his clothes, it bore the dust of several hundred miles—of the long trail from the Texas Panhandle across New Mexico into Arizona. Yet there was no hint of weariness in his lean young countenance. Rather, it held strength and energy and eagerness.

"I'm sure glad we started 'fore dawn," he declared, squinting at the indigo horizon. "Reckon this Arizona country is even prettier than our Panhandle."

The girl at his side laughed. "Hotter, too."

"Only one more day of it," he assured her comfortingly. "The way I figure it, Sue, we can't be more than thirty miles from Bella Vista Mesa and the HH spread. We ought to make it by sundown."

Sue Curtin didn't answer. She, too, let her gaze marvel at the rolling splendors south of them. She wasn't quite thirteen, but she was compact and sturdy and self-assured. Her freckled face, about which tumbled curls as brown as the dangling hair of her brother, was sensitive rather than beautiful; almost wistful now. She let her fingers idly play with the bonnet in her lap. And after a time she whispered:

"Reckon this is the way Grandpa and Grandma Curtin must have felt back in the days when they pioneered into Texas on a covered wagon."

"Like they owned everything they laid eyes on, eh?" Ben chuckled. "Yeah, that's the way I feel, too."

"Only," she amended, "Grandpa Curtin wasn't heading for a ranch all set to welcome him. He had to build his own." She paused, glanced at her brother apprehensively. "Do

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—do you think you'll be able to manage it, Ben? I mean, run this big HH outfit?"

"Why not?" he demanded with the superb confidence of youth. "I'm nineteen. Reckon I'm old enough to take hold of things!"

He spoke with far greater strength than he felt. But this Sue couldn't guess. She listened to his firm voice with its slight hint of rodomontade, and its sound made her feel easier. She even giggled, of a sudden, and pressed closer to him, promising:

"I'll help you!"

After that they looked southward again—travelers in a strange land. Both of them were so intent on admiring the desert that they failed completely to see the three horsemen who vanished behind rocks almost a mile away—three men who now waited patiently, their hands resting on six-guns.

One of those three stood holding the reins of a pinto that had gone lame during the night. It was quite evident that the horse couldn't carry him much farther. Its right foreleg threatened to collapse at every painful step. For that matter, the slim rider himself was not in the best of condition. His cadaverous face held the haggardness of suffering. Even now his back, just below the left shoulder, ached excruciatingly where white-hot iron had burned its way deep into the flesh.

"This," he suddenly snapped, "is a loco thing to do! I ain't hankerin' for more trouble. Suppose the hombre on that wagon recognizes us?"

The thickset, red-haired man at his side quietly replied: "Quit yelping, Slim. You can't ride that pinto any farther. Unless you get another horse, you're done for—and I see two horses on that chuck wagon."

The third man—he was short, heavy-shouldered, of middle age—peered uneasily around a boulder. Looking up the trail that bordered the desert, he mumbled:

"But Slim's right. If the hombre on that wagon recognizes us——"

"If it's somebody we know," impatiently cut in the red-haired figure, "we'll just let him go by. He won't even see us. But if he's a stranger—well, we've got to take a chance! We'll leave the horses behind these rocks, so's he won't be able to read brands. As for ourselves, there's nothing stopping us from tying bandannas around our faces, is there?"

"All the same——" uncertainly began the older man who watched the trail.

"We got no choice!" the red-haired figure insisted. "If we don't get one of those horses, Slim might just as well go back and give himself up to the sheriff's posse right now. A fresh horse is the only thing that'll save us. So yank out your gun and quit squawkin'!"

CHAPTER II.

HOLDUP.

A TIGHT smile on his lips, Ben Curtin watched the multifarious colors on the desert slowly harden into glaring golden light. There was something awesome in that infinite expanse of brilliant barrenness. For him it represented a new world, a new life, and he enjoyed the very thrill of seeing it.

A violent lurch of the wagon made him glance back at the equipment it carried. He looked at the camp gear, the gunny sacks, and the trunk that contained Sue's clothing.

And it was while he glanced over his shoulder that the horses reached the region of flat-topped boulders.

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Clutching the reins between his knees, Ben leaned back in the wagon to adjust a rope. Sue was watching the antics of a tiny green lizard on the side of a rock. So it was that both of them were caught entirely off guard when a raucous voice ordered:

"Rein in, folks! Stick up your arms!"

Ben whirled around as if a whip had lashed his back. Suddenly colorless, he stared down at the three men who had stepped out of nowhere, like Oriental jinn. They blocked the trail. The horses abruptly stopped of their own accord.

All three of those men leveled six-guns at the wagon. And all three had bandannas about their countenances, so that only their eyes, shaded by the brims of dusty sombreros, were visible—like the eyes of wild cats glaring out of dark caverns.

"Stick 'em up, I said!" the heaviest of the three repeated.

Young Ben Curtin felt his sister stiffen and shudder at his side. Breathless, he dropped a quick glance to the rifle behind his seat. He had a wild impulse to reach for it—or else to send the horses galloping ahead, despite the six-guns.

But the idea of drawing fire with Sue huddling beside him killed the thought.

Slowly, dazedly, he thrust his arms above his head.

"Get down off there," the big man snapped.

Ben began: "What in blazes——"

"Get down! How many times you got to be told?"

Sue, in a kind of panic, quickly rose and leaped down into the dust. She was, Ben saw, pallid in her fear. With her arms raised shakily, she stood blinking at the three men as if they were monstrous, impossible ogres lifted out of a nightmare.

Ben, looking into the unswerving black bores of three six-guns, slowly rose from the chuck-wagon seat. He let himself down to the trail with utmost deliberation. Though his face had lost color, it held the kind of indomitable defiance with which his grandfather must once have confronted hostile Texas Indians.

"What's the idea?" he demanded coldly. "What you-all want?"

He could see that the big man—the one apparently in authority—had curly red hair. It straggled out under the brim of his Stetson, covered the nape of his neck and his ears.

The fellow ignored Ben's query. To the slim man at his right he snapped:

"Unharness that bay. She looks like she might be all right. Not much speed, but plenty endurance."

"Looka here!" Ben Curtin expostulated. "You ain't aimin' to take——"

"If you behave yourself, son," the big man grimly interrupted, "we'll just take one o' your horses and let things go at that. If you try to get ornery or smart, you're apt to be baptized with lead. So stand where you are and keep your mouth shut."

HIS very tones infuriated Ben Curtin. His chest began to throb thunderously, and reckless anger flared in his eyes. He watched the slender man—the back of whose dirty brown shirt held a large burned hole—holster his weapon and move around to the bay mare. He saw that the red-haired fellow, also, momentarily switched his own attention to the team, though his six-gun still hung in his hand.

The only one who was actually

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guarding him at that instant was a broad-shouldered fellow whose stodginess suggested middle age. And as Ben glanced at him, this bandit, too, briefly averted his eyes. He squinted anxiously up the trail, as though to assure himself nobody was coming.

It was an insane risk to take. But somehow Ben Curtin allowed his mind to leap beyond logic. Unreasoning fury seethed in him. To be robbed of one of the mares that had brought him and Sue from Texas was——"

He acted on rash impulse.

With a jump like a wild cat's plunge Ben hurled himself at the stocky figure. His right fist crashed against the man's jaw just as his left hand grasped the fellow's six-gun.

There was a single shot that sent a slug ripping into the ground. While the stodgy man staggered back, gasping, Ben wrenched the weapon out of his hand.

He spun around with some wild idea of firing straight at the red-haired man.

But the outlaw he'd punched, recovering his balance, hurled himself back at Ben.

"You loco idjit!" he screamed.

As the words broke from him, he grasped Ben Curtin's arms from behind. He caught them just in time to prevent a shot at the red-haired man.

Ben struggled madly in that bearish grip. He wrenched and writhed and tore. Despite his slimness, he bore the heavy figure about like a load on his back. And Sue, suddenly stirred to a kind of hysteria, flung herself on the chunky man. She beat him with her fists, clawed his neck, tried to kick.

By that time, however, the slim bandit who'd been unharnessing the mare came running, a six-gun in his grasp. The red-haired outlaw advanced, too. His weapon was lifted, ready to shoot. But he must have realized that any shot at Ben might miss and hit the stocky fellow clinging to the youth's back.

So the man with the red hair didn't shoot. He ran forward, cursing, and raised the barrel of his gun over his head. He waited for an opportunity, then brought the weapon down viciously to crack on Ben Curtin's forehead.

That was the end of the fight.

Ben groaned. His eyes closed fiercely. His long legs collapsed under him, and he crumpled limply into the dust.

"The dog-gone fool!" panted the red-haired man, glaring down at the unconscious figure. "What did he think he could do—beat the *three* of us?"

MALEVOLENTLY he glared at Sue. She was on her knees, sobbing over Ben's unconscious body. She rolled him to his back, shook him; but the heavy man seized her shoulders and yanked her to her feet.

"Let him be!" he ordered harshly. "He brought it on himself! He'll be all right by and by." He turned to his thin companion and curtly added: "Go on, Slim. Unharness that mare!"

But "Slim" didn't immediately stir. He stood looking down at Ben with eyes which held a sudden expression of amazement. For a moment he seemed petrified.

"What you waiting for?" the bigger man rasped. "The sooner we get away from here, the better!"

Slim slowly raised his head. When he spoke, his tones held suppressed excitement.

"Hank," he said, "I—I got an idea!"

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"Huh?"—suspiciously.

"About this kid! Take a squint at him. Notice anything?"

Hank glowered down at Ben Curtin's insensate figure. "Notice what?" he demanded.

"He—he's just about as thin as I am, and about the same size, too!"

"What about it?"

Increasing excitement shone in Slim's eyes. "Listen, Hank," he went on tensely. "That blacksmith back in Delano didn't get a good look at me. I was masked. All he saw was my—my general shape. And he knows he branded me. The sheriff's posse—every sheriff in Arizona, for that matter—will be on the lookout for an hombre branded under the left shoulder. If they was to—to *find* one—sabe?—chances are they'd quit lookin' for *me!* See what I mean?"

Hank did see. The eyes above his bandanna began to widen. He looked from Slim down at Ben Curtin and back again. Then he whispered:

"By thunder! Maybe—maybe you're right!"

"If I could swap clothes with him," Slim said quickly, "you and me could drive away with the chuck wagon. We'd have to take the kid along, of course." He nodded to Sue, who stood appalled, speechless in terror. "Couldn't leave her around to give the play away. But Cal here—with a glance at the middle-aged figure—"Cal could stand guard over this young critter. He might even march him into Delano and turn him over to the sheriff. Cal's known hereabouts. Nobody'd doubt his word. He could say the kid came up to him on a lame horse, tried to steal his pony, and Cal grabbed him. If he was to be wearin' my clothes and ridin' my pinto—both of which that blacksmith might have seen—nobody would doubt he's the hombre who took a crack at the bank!"

The man called Cal put in uneasily: "You're forgettin' the brand on your back, Slim. The blacksmith knows he branded you. That's the first thing they'd hunt for."

Between the top of his bandanna and the brim of his Stetson Slim's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Sure," he whispered, "I realize that. But——" He paused, as if for emphasis; then went on in a lower voice: "Give me five minutes to get a fire started! Give me another fifteen minutes to heat iron. There's a pickax in that chuck wagon. I could get one of its ends glowing red-hot. Why can't I brand this hombre under his left shoulder?"

Sue Curtin screamed. Without warning, she hurled herself at the slim man. She began battering him with her hands, scratching at his face. She ripped his bandanna away.

"You devil!" she shrieked. "You low——"

Big Hank caught the girl. He clasped a huge hand over her face, crushed her back against his chest. Though she kicked and writhed and sobbed, he held her powerless. As though scarcely aware of her, he said:

"That's quite an idea, Slim. If we can turn a branded man over to the sheriff, they'll quit huntin' you. Yes—it's quite an idea!"

But the middle-aged Cal, his tones awed and shaken, unexpectedly objected: "Gosh, no! We—we *can't* do a thing like that to the kid. Deliberately brand him——"

The red-haired Hank whirled toward him, challenging savagely:

"Would you rather go to jail?"

"Jail? *Me?*"—in horror.

"If they catch Slim, chances are they'll find out sooner or later you

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and me rode with him! That means the three of us will be cooked!"

Cal seemed dazed. "But to brand a kid like that——" he whispered, spreading protesting hands. "Gosh —I don't know, Hank——"

"If you don't know, keep your mouth shut! I think Slim has the right idea. The sooner he gets through with it, the better. Go on, Slim. Get started!"

CHAPTER III.

THE KILLER BRAND.

IN taking the pickax from the chuck wagon, Slim uncovered two coils of rawhide rope. So it was that when Ben Curtin opened glazed eyes some ten minutes later he found himself sprawling face down on the ground, his arms and legs securely bound. He lay as helpless as a hamstrung maverick.

At the beginning he couldn't think clearly. He lifted his head and gazed through blurs across the golden expanse of the desert. Then he heard voices. Their sounds affected him drastically, and the recollection of all that had occurred rushed back upon him in a wave of outrage.

He looked around—and checked his breath.

Sue, ghastly of face, stood lashed to one of the wagon wheels. Rope encircled her chest and arms and legs, keeping her safely out of the way. With terrified intensity she was staring down at a small fire beside which squatted Slim and the red-haired Hank.

Ben saw with uncomprehending confusion that the edge of a pickax was buried in the flames. The two men watched it in silence.

They had torn the bandannas from their faces. Ben saw that the red-haired fellow had loose, massive jowls and small eyes embedded in lumps of bulging fat. His was an uncompromising countenance. Slim's face was vastly different—a thin face full of cunning and shrewdness. As for the third man, he had gone to stand in front of the horses. Like a sentinel he squinted over the trail.

"Listen, you hombres!" Ben blurted.

They looked at him quickly. The red-haired man deliberately rose and came to his side.

"Son," he said quietly, "you do the listenin'. You can save yourself plenty trouble by answering a few questions."

Ben peered up at him with inflamed eyes. He rapped out: "Go to blazes!"

"That ain't goin' to do you a bit of good," Hank assured him. He nodded toward the chuck wagon. "I just been talkin' to your kid sister. She ain't much for palavering, but the way I get it, you youngsters come from Texas. That right?"

"What's it to you?"

"Plenty. She said as how you were headed for the HH Ranch up on Bella Vista Mesa. That bein' the case, you're probably the Curtin kids."

Ben lay bewildered but silent.

"If I'm right," Hank went on, "you were on your way to take hold of the ranch that used to be Henry Hendricks's. And nobody knows you hereabouts. That so?"

Ben said succinctly: "I'll see you in hell 'fore I answer any questions!"

There was a momentary hush while Hank studied the prostrate youth keenly, thoughtfully. Behind him the fire crackled. Perhaps he saw in the taut young face an obduracy which was unconquerable. For he shrugged presently and turned back to Slim.

"No use tryin' to *force* words out

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of him," he said. "All I wanted to make sure of was that they was strangers around here. If nobody in Delano knows that young maverick, we don't have to worry much."

Without looking up from the fire, Slim said quietly: "Reckon this iron is just about ready."

Sue cried out in shrill terror. She jerked agonized eyes toward her brother. "They're going to brand you!" she screamed.

And at that Ben went rigid. As he watched Slim rise with the pickax in his hand, the youth's lips fell open. He wanted to gasp, but not a sound escaped him. In a kind of hypnotic trance he saw the thin man come toward him, holding up the red-hot tip of iron.

"Rip his shirt off," tersely said Slim.

Hank nodded. As he bent, Ben tried desperately to wrench himself free of the rope. He writhed and squirmed like a wounded lizard, stirred up clouds of dust. But all his thrashings were futile. The rawhide held him helpless.

Vaguely he was aware of Sue's cries. She was hysterical. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She, too, fought against the bonds that held her to the wagon wheel, but her struggles were useless.

While Hank ripped off Ben Curtin's shirt, the middle-aged Cal anxiously returned from the front of the team.

"Listen," he whispered huskily. "Maybe—maybe we oughtn't to do it. I don't know—it kind of goes against the grain——"

"Shut up!" Hank said flatly.

"I tell you——"

"You told us enough." Hank rose with the shirt in his hand. "All right, Slim," he directed. "Go ahead."

Slim placed his boot on Ben's neck to keep the youth from squirming. Hank kneeled and weighed down Ben's kicking legs. There was an instant of terrible stillness, while the red-hot tip of the ax sank toward the naked back.

"Don't!" shrieked Sue. *"Do-on't!"*

Nobody glanced at her.

And the iron burned its way deep into the youth's flesh.

A tiny spiral of smoke rose from the wound, and with it a dreadful odor. The bald-headed Cal winced, turned away as though he could no longer witness this thing.

None of those men heard Sue now. None of them knew the girl made a last desperate effort to tear herself out of her bonds. When she saw the ax rise from her brother's body, she sagged in a faint.

"Well," quietly said Slim, straightening, "that's that."

FOR an interval that might have been a minute or an eternity, Ben Curtin lay in a stupor. He didn't lose consciousness. His brain was merely frozen. Never before in all his nineteen years had he suffered pain so excruciating as he knew now. The fiery gash in his back seemed to inflame and rack his whole body.

He didn't see Slim and Hank put out the fire, cover all traces of it under sand. He didn't hear Hank say to the squat, heavily proportioned Cal: "The rest is up to you. Slim and me, we'll vamose with the wagon. You find the sheriff and tell him your story."

In fact, Ben Curtin didn't know what happened for a while. He couldn't find the strength to lift his head until much later, when he heard the chuck wagon rattling away.

Then, despite the torture that paralyzed him, he looked around

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over his shoulder. He saw the two men were on the seat. One horse, Hank's, was hitched to the back of the wagon. Sue, bound hand and foot, lay like a sack among bags of camp gear.

"Sue!" hoarsely gasped Ben. *"Sue!"*

She didn't answer. She couldn't. A bandanna had been bound around her lips to gag her screams. Ben glared wildly at the stodgy man who stood guard beside him.

"Where—where they taking her?"

Cal answered thickly: "She'll be all right."

"Where they going? They—they can't take her like that! She—she's just a kid!"

"Shut up," huskily said Cal, and turned away.

In his own queer way Cal Rascomb was a sensitive creature. Somehow he couldn't witness the torment of this youth on the ground. He preferred to look after the receding, rocking chuck wagon. Dust trailed it—huge yellow billows which effectively concealed the girl among the bags.

Again Ben cried a hoarse, "Sue! *Sue!*" But he might as well have been alone in the center of that tremendous Gila Desert. The chuck wagon continued its rumbling departure. Neither Hank nor Slim glanced back.

Half insane in his terror and despair, Ben Curtin looked around as though praying for some miraculous force to free him from the ropes. Vaguely he realized that his clothes had been taken away from him. In their place he now wore the tattered brown garments which had been Slim's. Also, Slim's burned shirt had been yanked over his torso. And an empty holster had been strapped around his waist.

But all this didn't matter. Nothing mattered now—not even the throbbing, burning gash in his back. Nothing except that Sue was being taken away on that chuck wagon by two strangers who knew only cruelty and ruthlessness. He shrieked again.

"For the love o' Pete!" suddenly snarled Cal Rascomb, glowering. "Keep your mouth shut, can't you? Howling ain't goin' to do you any good. You're just getting on my nerves!"

Ben Curtin looked up at him with the eyes of a madman.

"So help me," he drove out wildly, "if I ever get free o' these ropes, I—I'll kill all three o' you!"

He meant it with all the passion and bitterness in his soul. That was the moment at which Ben Curtin developed the heart of a killer.

Cal Rascomb said stiffly: "Oh, shut up and rest. We got more'n twenty-eight miles to travel."

CHAPTER IV.

THE POSSE.

FOR more than two hours, however, they did not move away from that spot. Perhaps the stocky Cal wished to allow the chuck wagon plenty of time to disappear into the rugged country beyond the rim of the desert.

As the sun's heat increased, Cal Rascomb sat down in the shade of a boulder. Propping his back against the rock, he drew up his knees and rolled himself a cigarette. His sombrero, thrust far back on his head, revealed the fact that he was bald. His face, scowling now, was a square block with small purplish pouches dangling under the eyes.

Long after the chuck wagon had vanished, he rose and pulled Ben Curtin into the shadows of another boulder. Then he settled down,

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smoked a second cigarette, and pondered.

Inherently Cal Rascomb wasn't so barbarically merciless as the two men with whom he had worked. In a vague way he regretted the impulse which had prompted him to join those two in their attempted raid on the Delano Bank. He and Hank had stood guard at opposite sides of the street, while Slim had gone alone to force the bank door. And now——

"Well," he reasoned, "I'm in it, and I may as well see the thing through. If I don't turn this kid over to the posse, I sure can't explain him bein' with me—and that brand on his back—without sending myself to jail. Reckon I just *got* to go through with it. Unless I kill him——"

But for a deliberate murder he lacked sufficient viciousness. So at last, when almost two and a half hours had passed, he rose. He went to Ben Curtin and freed his ankles. The wrists, however, he kept tightly bound behind the youth's back.

"Get up," he ordered.

Ben peered at him with eyes that were bloodshot and deadly. He didn't move.

"Did you hear me?" Cal Rascomb demanded.

Ben grated: "You can go plumb to blazes!"

An instant the thickset man flushed. Then, as the color subsided from his countenance, he shrugged.

"All right," he said flatly. "You can suit yourself. We're heading for Delano. I'm going to ride my horse and lead the lame pinto. You won't be able to straddle that critter—not with his leg the way it is. So you'll have to walk. If you don't get up on your hind legs, I'll just drag you along with this rope. What d'you say?"

Ben realized that opposition could bring nothing but further torture. His branded back no longer ached so terribly as it had two hours ago, but it still filled him with feverish throbs.

Stiffly he struggled to his feet.

"That's better," Cal Rascomb commended, with a nod. "Now let's get going."

"What—what they doin' to my sister?"

"I don't know."

"If they hurt her——"

"What's the use of threatening?" Cal asked in disgust. There's nothin' you can do about it, son. Come on. Start moving."

WITH blazing sunlight beating down on him, revealing every new line in his young face, Ben Curtin stood rigid, his hands bound behind his back. His brown hair, filled with dust, dangled over his forehead. Streaks of dirt discolored his cheeks.

He saw Cal Rascomb turn to his horse, a big roan gelding. The man lifted a boot to a stirrup.

And that was when the reckless idea stabbed Ben. His eyes widened, flashed. Perhaps it was a crazy thing to attempt. But anything was better than meek subservience!

Without hesitation he suddenly dashed forward.

Scarcely a dozen feet separated him from Cal Rascomb. The squat man heard him coming and turned. He looked around an instant too late.

For Ben jumped.

He leaped high, his booted legs outstretched in front of him. Both his heels crashed simultaneously against Cal Rascomb's chest. They

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hit like battering rams. Rascomb yelled explosively.

He went staggering back to fall in a huddle ten feet from the startled horse.

"You dog-gone——" he roared.

Ben didn't hear him. Somehow he managed to land on both feet. He lurched against the gelding and regained his balance. He lifted a leg, thrust it into the stirrup. The horse shied. Whether he could manage this with his wrists behind his back, he didn't stop to question. He merely jumped again, swung his free leg high, over the saddle.

And somehow he succeeded! He landed on the horse with a thud that jarred him. His knees found their hold.

"Come on, boy!" he gasped, and jabbed heels into the horse's sides. "Come on!"

The astounded gelding leaped away. It started off at a crazy gallop. For a wild, dazzling instant Ben Curtin saw escape and liberty ahead—a chance to free himself and to start after Sue.

But he forgot the long rope that dangled to the ground from his wrists. It trailed him, swishing through the dust like a snake.

Cal Rascomb saw that rope just as he started to draw a six-gun. He released the weapon, hurled himself across the ground with arms outstretched. He got his hands on the lariat, grasped it, stiffened the muscles of his arms for the jolt.

An instant later, when the rope snapped taut, Cal Rascomb still sprawled on the ground. He yanked hard—and had the savage satisfaction of seeing Ben Curtin pulled completely out of the saddle.

The youth crashed on his back. The gelding, relieved of his weight, ran a hundred yards before it stopped to look back, ears pricked up, tail lashing.

"You blasted fool!" gasped Cal Rascomb, scrambling to his feet. "What you trying to do? Don't you know I could have put a slug through you?"

Panting audibly, Ben glared at the man with blazing hatred.

"You've got nerve," Cal had to admit. "But it ain't goin' to do you any good to try loco stunts like that! From now on I'll keep my eyes on you every second. If you make a play like that again, I'll pump lead into you. Just remember, son, that if I towed you into Delano dead it'd be a lot easier than takin' you in alive!"

Lying there, Ben Curtin said nothing. For the first time in years he had to fight against a surge of hot, blinding tears. He had made a desperate effort, and it had failed; and the failure all but cracked his nerve.

"Now get up on your legs," snapped Cal Rascomb, "and we'll start all over again!"

UNTIL noon they pressed on doggedly through the terrific heat. The trail swung northward from the desert's edge and wound uphill into a country of stunted trees, twisted canyons, and vast rock formations.

Cal Rascomb, riding his gelding, led the lame pinto. From his saddle horn a fifteen-foot length of rope stretched to the bound wrists of the youth who walked in front of the horses. Covered with dust, Ben trudged heavily. His head drooped, and his shoulders were hunched. Through the rip in the back of his shirt Cal could distinctly see the hideous gash left by hot iron. The flesh around it was red, swollen, an inflamed blotch fully eight inches in diameter.

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To Cal Rascomb it seemed strange that the youth never spoke. But Ben was beyond words now. He could think only of Sue. Even the pulsating wound in his back no longer concerned him. It was Sue, Sue, Sue, that hammered in his brain with every step. He didn't dare try to guess what those two men were doing to her.

When they had gone almost ten miles, Cal growled: "Next time we see water, we'll stop and rest. But not long. I'm hankerin' to make Delano 'fore nightfall."

Ben Curtin offered no reply.

Then, of a sudden, the thuds of oncoming horses floated through the hot stillness.

Cal instantly reined in, brought Ben Curtin to a halt. Frowning, he turned in his creaking saddle to peer uphill toward the right. Ben looked that way, too. But his eyes were queerly incurious. They seemed to be focused inward on his own agonizing thoughts.

Yet he saw the cavalcade which presently appeared on the rocky ridge above them. There were eight men in the group—and a girl. At the sight of the two figures on the trail the girl swiftly lifted her arm and cried:

"Uncle Cal!"

Then she came thundering down the slope, leaving the men behind. She was slender and young, with a wealth of golden hair flying back from her strained countenance. A Stetson hung by its strap on her back. She rode a lively buckskin. Ben watched her approach with frank hostility. If she was this man's niece, he hated her.

She pulled up in a billow of dust, swung gracefully out of her saddle. She couldn't be much older than Sue, he knew—not more than sixteen, at any rate. At Ben she sent a single astounded glance. Then she whirled to her uncle.

"Where have you been?" she ejaculated. "When you didn't get back by morning, I—I rode into Delano looking for you!"

"I was havin' trouble," replied Cal Rascomb. His narrowed eyes were uneasily fixed on the men who slowly rode down the slope. Abruptly he glared at the girl. "There wasn't any sense to *your* gettin' scary!" he rapped out in irritation. "Reckon I can take care o' myself, can't I?"

"But—but you've been gone since noontime yesterday," she protested. "I couldn't help being worried."

"I'm all right, ain't I?" he growled.

She looked at Ben. "Who——"

"Don't ask questions," snapped Cal Rascomb. "I'll explain everything to the sheriff." He lifted a hand in greeting. "Hi, Matt! Glad I met up with you."

Deputy Sheriff Matt Anderson, a tall, gray-haired figure as dignified as an army colonel, called: "Glad to see you're all right, Rascomb. Met your niece a while back, and she was plumb worried. Who's that you're haulin' into town?"

"An hombre who tried to swap horses with me," Cal Rascomb answered curtly. "Claims his name is Ben Curtin. He's been actin' kind o' crazy, what with a fresh brand on his back——"

"*Brand?*" cried Deputy Sheriff Anderson. Impulsively he dug rowels into his horse. "Brand? By thunder, you've got the man we're huntin'!"

ANDERSON bent forward in his saddle as he came plunging downhill. He wasn't the only one who shouted in sudden triumph. His posse broke into an excited chorus. All of them now thundered down the slope.

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Swinging out of his saddle, Deputy Sheriff Anderson met Ben Curtins's defiant eyes. He stepped behind the youth and gaped at the ugly scar on his back.

"By thunder!" he whispered. "It's him, all right!" He swung to Cal Rascomb. "How'd you get him?"

Cal countered craftily. "Why you been huntin' him, Matt?"

"He tried to rob the Delano Bank. Shot Jethro Hawkins! We've been ridin' all night."

"By golly!" whispered Cal Rascomb. He widened his eyes, let his mouth fall open in bewilderment. "I—I kind of figured he was a tough outlaw of some kind!"

"How'd you rope him?" Anderson insisted.

By that time the entire crowd of riders were dismounting on the trail. Through dust clouds Ben Curtin peered from face to face. On the girl's countenance he encountered a mixture of horror and indignation. There wasn't much use talking now, he told himself grimly. The wisest thing to do was to wait until Cal Rascomb had told his story. Then he'd know how to reply. So he remained silent, his lips tightly clamped.

"I—I was headin' home from Delano last night," Cal explained. "I'd had a couple o' drinks too many, I reckon, and I wasn't makin' much speed. It was pretty late—after midnight—when this youngster popped out o' nowhere and tried to hold me up. His horse had gone lame, seems like, and he wanted to swap ponies with me. Well, he had me for a while. But when he turned to swing into my saddle, I jumped him. We scrapped around a bit, and I managed to bang my gun barrel down on his head. There's the mark under his hair, if you want to take a look."

But Deputy Sheriff Anderson didn't have to make a close inspection. The welt on Ben Curtin's forehead was clear enough.

"He wouldn't do any explainin'," Cal Rascomb dryly went on. "All I got out o' him was that his name was Ben Curtin. I—I must have hit him pretty hard, 'cause he wasn't in any condition to stir till after sunup. Just lay there groanin', half conscious. I trussed him up with his own rope. When he came to, I let him rest for a spell. Figured I'd better poke him back to Delano and turn him over to you, sheriff. Horse thieves ain't never been my pets."

The men around Ben Curtin glowered at him. They looked savagely determined to wreak justice. The calmest one among them, it seemed, was Deputy Sheriff Matt Anderson himself. Erect and lithe of figure, despite his curly gray hair, he turned quickly to Cal Rascomb's prisoner.

"Well," he snapped, "what you got to say?"

Ben drove through his teeth: "The whole story's a dog-gone lie!"

"That brand on your back ain't a lie!"

"I got it from this hombre—from him and two other coyotes who were riding with him."

At that the girl cried heatedly: "That's ridiculous, sheriff! You know Uncle Cal would never——"

"Keep out of this, Jenny," peremptorily ordered Cal Rascomb. He glared at Ben. "I wouldn't expect you to admit things, feller. But go on and tell the sheriff some more lies."

EVEN as he started to speak, Ben Curtin realized how hopeless it would be to make these men believe him. Apparently they knew and respected Cal Ras-

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comb. As for himself, he was a stranger in Arizona—a youth without background, one whose word nobody had cause to accept.

Nevertheless he told his story. Either because it was so fantastic and incredible, or because his eyes blazed with such insane despair while he spoke, nobody ventured to interrupt. Even Jenny, the niece of Cal Rascomb, listened in amazement.

When Ben finished, the sheriff slowly muttered something indistinguishable.

"Looka here," hoarsely blurted the youth. His face was suddenly congested, red, pleading. "What you do to me right now ain't o' much importance. It's my *sister* I'm thinkin' about! Those buzzards took her back on the trail—Heaven knows where! If you'd only send a few men high-tailin' that way, maybe they can catch up with the chuck wagon and—and get her 'fore it's too late! Please——"

"The boy's crazy," flatly declared Cal Rascomb. "He was alone when we met. I didn't see anything of a chuck wagon or a girl."

Deputy Sheriff Anderson said to Ben in a low, heavy voice: "Listen, son. I've known Cal Rascomb for nigh on to twenty years. He's a reputable rancher. I'm takin' his word. Sabe?"

"But I tell you——" desperately cried Ben.

"You can do your tellin' later. There's a very simple way o' checkin' up on your story."

"What d'you mean?"

"The brand on the outlaw's back was put there by Jethro Hawkins, the blacksmith over in Delano. Jethro's laid up at the doc's house with a couple o' slugs in his body. But he's conscious and he knows what he's saying. According to Jethro, he claims he can identify the feller he branded. He says he'll reckernize the hombre by his very size and shape. So I'm goin' to haul you into Delano and let Jethro Hawkins take a look at you. Come on! You can ride double with one of the boys."

"But what about my sister?" cried Ben. Despite himself, his voice was hoarse and loud, shaken by its very importunity. "All I'm askin', sheriff, is that you send a few men along that trail! You don't have to believe me now about anything else, I tell you—only about Sue——"

For a moment Deputy Sheriff Anderson considered in silence, his narrowed eyes fastened on Ben Curtin's perspiring young face—a face that seemed to have become gaunt in a few hours. Possibly the youth's very intensity swayed him.

"All right," he decided abruptly, and turned to three men at his right. "You gents fork your ponies and hit the trail. Keep going till sundown. If you meet up with any chuck wagon, bring it to Delano."

For more than this, Ben knew, he could not ask. A moment later, with his lips set in a bitter slash, he let himself be hoisted into a saddle. Another man mounted with him. And as the cavalcade started toward Delano, he heard the girl, Jenny Rascomb, whisper to the deputy sheriff in an awed, vaguely frightened tone:

"What—what can a man get for what he's charged with?"

Matt Anderson grimly retorted: "Ten, twenty years in jail, Miss Jenny—dependin' on how the judge feels about it!"

They rode on in heavy, ominous silence.

To be continued in next week's issue.

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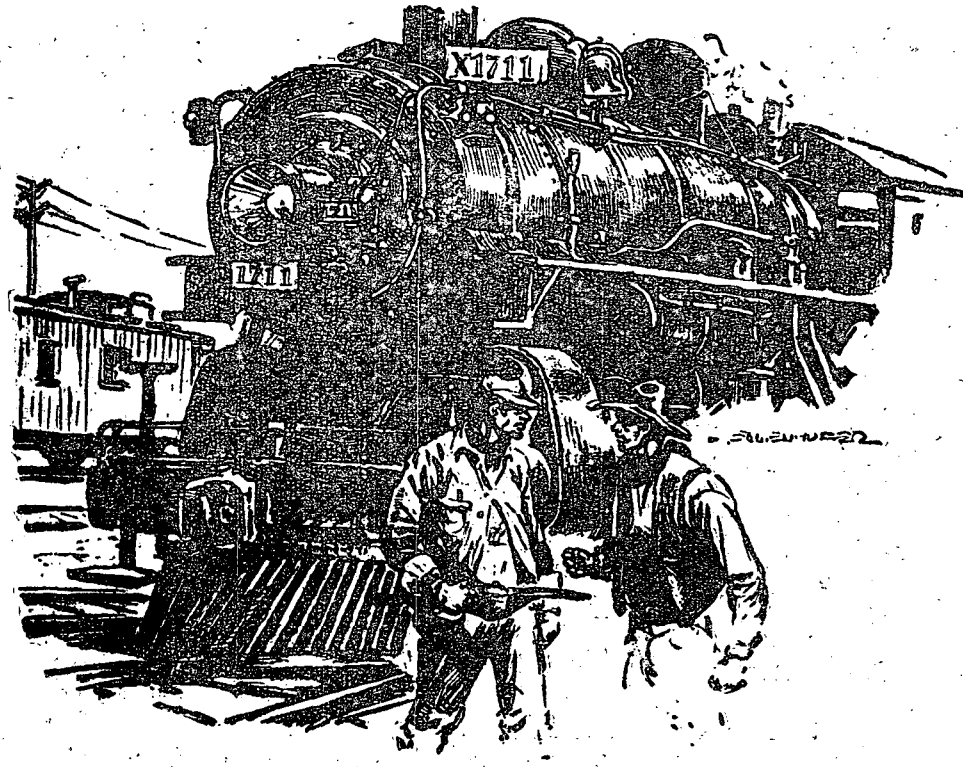

BACK TRACK

By CUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Stormy," etc.

THE burly man in overalls and greasy cap, standing beside the locomotive, oil can in hand, spoke with a rasp of disgust.

"I'm getting sick and tired of it, Kent. I've been supporting the family without any help from you too long. I'm willing to do my share, but not five times my share. Now, you either get you a job and——"

"I've got me a job." Kent Raymer's jaw was set. His eyes were hostile as they returned the angry gaze of his older brother.

Price Raymer snorted. "Call that a job? Punching cows! At forty a month! I've told you again and again that if you'd study a little I can get you a job on the railroad for three times that money."

"And I've told you again and again," Kent retorted, "that I don't want a job on the railroad. You ride your engine, and I'll ride my broncho. I've been turning half my wages over to you each month, haven't I? And I don't live at home. Dog-gone it, Price! I'm doing the best I can."

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"You may call it your best, but I've got another name for it. We have a younger brother and sister to raise and educate, and if you're gonna continue to lie down on the job, you can just pack your traps and get out."

Kent's face turned a little white. He loved that younger brother and sister. He said between his teeth:

"All right, I'll get out. You never have had any use for me and have just been looking for a chance to give me the gate. All right," he repeated violently, "if that's the way you feel about it!"

He flung around and strode down a cindered path between tracks, his head high under the stained sombrero. Price Raymer put out an involuntary hand and opened his mouth to call him back. He hadn't known that Kent would take it like that. He'd just meant to stir him up. Then the face of the engineer darkened. Let the cocky young rooster go, if that's all the sense he had. He'd learn soon enough that he couldn't go strutting around the world with a chip on his shoulder.

FOR two hours Kent had been at it. He had never been on a real, "honest-to-goodness bender" before, and it took him some time to get started. He was fully aware that he was playing the fool. But he had to do something to drown his sense of loss, that gone feeling in the middle of him. He had no home any more. He hadn't known before what the word home meant to him. He would never again see Jack and Virgie. Jack and Virgie!

Kent emptied the bottle and thought: "*That's* what's the matter with old Price! He's jealous because Jack and Virgie like me. Because we sit down and sing songs and play the guitar at night, instead of glooming over a book the way old Price does. Blast him!" Aloud, he ordered: "Give me another bottle!"

Oak Ridge was a small town, and it soon got about that young Kent Raymer was on a "tear;" and several men tried remonstrance. Kent's only response was to order more whisky and taunt them:

"Go tell Price about it. His freight train is about pullin' outta Big Bend by this time. Maybe you better telegraph him and tell him what a swell spectacle his no-good brother is making of himself! It'll make him happy. Price is always right, you know. Always so gosh-darned right!"

Kent flung about, with his back to the bar and jeered: "Why don't you all pile onto me and *make* me stop drinking? Get outta the way, every mother's son of you!" The cowboy's mood was becoming ugly. He shoved at the men on each side of him with his elbows.

"Watch what you're doin', you pie-faced waddy!" growled a voice. "You can just pay for that drink o' mine that you spilled."

Kent lurched about to face a lowering, bearded man who was just righting an overturned glass.

"Well, if it isn't old Bit Moses!" Kent snarled. "Me pay for your drinks? Not in two blue moons! Get outta my sight, you fat guzzler!"

He shoved Moses with his elbow. The man's fist shot out and caught the cowboy in the chest, sending him back against the bar. Kent threw his arms up on the counter to keep from falling. His hand closed on a beer bottle standing there. He swung it up, and then brought it down with a crash on the head of Moses. The man went to the floor as if he had been hit with an ax.

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There was an instant and startling silence in the room. Kent stood looking down, the unbroken bottle still in his hand.

"Get up!" he growled. "Get up on your hind legs, you hog, and let me knock you down again."

The ominous quiet about him penetrated his foggy brain. He looked around, then again at Moses. A bit of blood was oozing from a great welt above the man's eye. He made Kent think of a limp wet rag, sprawled there. As if through a haze, the cowboy saw some one step forward and stoop down. The dim form straightened at last, and a voice a long way off said:

"He's done for, all right."

Kent set the bottle carefully on the bar. He was aware that men were backing away from him. He turned and walked out. It never occurred to any one to try to stop him, because he *walked* out, out the front door and down the street. For the next half hour, his actions were purely automatic.

He got his horse, saddled it, and rode out of town at a fast pace. All his faculties were bent on trying to make the thing seem real. He hadn't killed Moses. Of course he hadn't killed a man!

FOR an hour he argued the question with himself, as the drink gradually cleared from his head. Sure, he hadn't killed any one. Why, he never had killed any one! He wasn't that kind of fellow. He was an honest and decent and fairly competent cowboy and he wouldn't hurt a fly. He didn't even like it when he had to hurt animals, as a part of his day's work. Which reminded him that he had better be getting back to the Mason ranch. The boss would be sore if he wasn't on the job in the morning.

And suddenly Kent's thoughts all fell into order, and everything was as plain as print. He *had* killed a man! The appalling fact just stood there and looked him in the face. He tried to dodge it and couldn't. Sweat broke out all over his body, and he began to shake with horror. He drove in the spurs, and his horse nearly leaped from under him.

He rode all night, flying with the instinct of an animal from a pursuer. Dawn found him well outside the county, near the summit of White Pass. It was only a hundred miles or so from here to the border. He would cross through the pass and then lie up for the day and rest his weary horse.

The mountain stillness was cut by four long blasts from a locomotive. Heart hammering, he pulled his horse to a stop. He had not realized that he was so close to the railroad. Then he shook himself angrily. What was there to be afraid of? Just a freight train, laboring up the pass. And suddenly it occurred to him. That would be Price's train.

Kent pressed closer to the track through the screen of brush. He would wave his superior and virtuous brother a sardonic though invisible farewell.

From a position well above the track, he saw the engine labor in view, heard again the long warning whistle for the woods road crossing, just below him. He glimpsed the fireman, busy with the coal shovel. Price would be on the other side of the cab, at the throttle.

And suddenly the blood of the cowboy seemed to stop in his veins. A man appeared suddenly out of the brush at the track side. It was old Ben Moulton, a trapper whom Kent knew slightly.

The man walked straight up on

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the track, in front of the oncoming engine. Though he knew the complete uselessness of it, an involuntary shout of warning rose to the lips of the young man. The cowcatcher struck Moulton, lifted him as if he had been a chip, and hurled him clear across the track, in front of the engine, and down the slight embankment on the other side. Kent heard the scream of suddenly set brakes, saw the train slow to a stop.

Then his own position came back to mind. He lost no time getting out of there.

But, as he rode away, he could not help feeling a grim satisfaction in one thing. Price would not be so smug about his record on the road, after this. Eleven years as an engineer, and he hadn't injured any one. Well, Price Raymer had killed a man, now. Both the Raymers had killed somebody. By accident, of course, but the men were just as dead as if murder had been the intent. Price wouldn't be so superior now.

IT wasn't much of a ranch, and it wasn't much of a job, there south of the border; and the wages were so small that forty a month looked like a fortune. But it meant safety, and Kent took the unpleasant aspects of it with a tight mouth and a wry grin. Then, one day in a little town of sprawled adobe houses, he picked up an American newspaper. It was one that some traveling salesman had tossed down on a saloon table.

Kent snatched it up with a sudden hunger that reddened his face. He devoured it, column by column. All at once a few paragraphs on an inside page seemed to come off the paper and hit him full in the face. He read it, then again and again. He laid the paper down, his mind rather blank for a minute. The relatives of Ben Moulton were suing the railroad company. They had paid no attention to the old man in many years, while he lived alone in a mountain cabin; but they had developed a great interest in him after his death. They were suing on the grounds that the engineer could not have blown his whistle for the crossing, and had been grossly neglectful of his duty, since he could not help but see Moulton's approach to the track.

Not only this, but they had asked for an indictment of manslaughter against the engineer, Price Raymer. Once more Kent read the item. Then he hunted for older papers and found two copies that gave a fuller account of the matter. The cowboy got on his horse and rode out to the ranch where he was working. One thing he could not understand. All the stories left out the one obvious reason for that accident. Of course, Moulton was unknown at the county seat where the hearings were held; but still——

As Kent ruminated over the matter, he began to feel a little sorry for Price. They surely couldn't make that indictment stick; but Price would lose his job, and his record would be blackened. After all, maybe it was something to be a little proud of, not to have hurt any one in eleven years of driving a locomotive through the mountains. Price had never said much about it, but Kent had sensed his feeling about his record. Kent had possessed a little secret pride in it himself.

Then, a few days later, it suddenly occurred to the young man that he was a witness in this case. He had seen the whole thing. He knew that the fireman had told the

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truth, when he'd stated that he had been stoking the engine at the time of the accident, and had seen no one. Kent knew that Moulton had been on the left side of the track and not on the right, where he fell. The brush grew up close to the left side, but on the right side, it was some distance back from the crossing. That was one of the strong points of the prosecution, that Moulton could not possibly have stepped suddenly into view, that Raymer had had ample time to see him and bring his train to a halt.

And, thought Kent, every last person concerned was leaving out the one vital part of the whole business. He couldn't understand that part of it. Didn't they know? Well, he could sure tell them if they didn't know!

And right there Kent Raymer felt all the blood go back to his heart. His hands were icy. He couldn't go back to Oak Ridge! He could never go back. He could never clear Price of that charge of failure in his duty. And they might make that indictment stick, after all. His brother might have to go to trial for manslaughter—for a thing in which he was not the least to blame.

Very clearly now, Kent saw that there was no parallel between his case and Price's. True, each of them had killed a man. But how different the circumstances. And Kent could clear his brother, could save him his job and, what would mean more to Price than the job even, his reputation.

The cowboy put in a very bad week. He could not sleep nights. He would doze off, only to see a crowded courtroom, and wake, sweating. But he couldn't go back. He couldn't. If he did, he would be the one facing that courtroom, not Price.

Finally, one night, he got out of bed. He dressed and went outside. He stood for a long time, leaning against a corral fence, looking up at the stars. If he should ever be where he could not walk out and look up at them, whenever he wanted to—— Again he felt cold all over. But he couldn't go back—ever. He must go down to town to-morrow and see if he could find a paper. The hearing was set for the fifteenth, before old Judge Gore. The judge had a lifetime's reputation for fairness and square dealing. The railroad company had left the decision up to him unreservedly. Maybe the judge would clear it all up, anyway. But Judge Gore wouldn't know, he would have no way of knowing the truth.

Suddenly Kent was shaking in every muscle. The square thing—the square thing. No, no!

And then he found himself saddling his horse, with hands that couldn't feel a thing. All that long night as he rode, he watched the stars.

BILL JAMES, the town marshal of Oak Ridge, turned his head quickly at the strange tone of the voice that called his name. He stared.

"Why, Kent, where'n Tophet did you come from? And what the—— Why, boy, you look like a ghost."

Kent made an impatient gesture as he looked through the door into the crowded courtroom.

"Bill, you got to get me in there. I don't know how to do it or who to see. You know. Get me in there, quick!" Kent's voice rose a little

The amazed marshal said soothingly: "Now, take it easy, son. You're just all kinda wrought up. That ain't gonna help matters a mite."

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"Bill," said Kent between his teeth, "are you gonna go and tell Judge Gore to listen to me, or have I got to go bustin' in there and make a holy show of this?"

Bill James was looking at him with new attention. "What're you drivin' at? What do you wanta tell the judge?"

"I saw Moulton killed."

"You!" The marshal's jaw dropped.

"I saw it, Bill, and I can tell just how it happened." Kent was keeping his voice under control with an effort. "Price wasn't the least bit to blame, and I can prove it."

"Then," said the marshal sternly, "why wasn't you here long before this?"

Kent swore with sudden passion. "I'm here now. Will you do something, or shall I——"

"I'll go, I'll go!" Bill James promised hastily. "You wait right here."

"I'll wait, all right," stated Kent grimly.

The marshal grumbled over his shoulder, as he began to worm his way into the courtroom: "It's irregular as all get out, with the hearin' just about finished. But I'll see what I can do."

A little later Kent found himself sitting in a chair facing that full room. He had no clear idea of how he got there. It was through a kind of mist that he saw the face of Price, frowning, puzzled. Close on either side of their big brother sat Jack and Virgie, both looking a little frightened. Well, no wonder the kids were scared, with one brother in trouble and the other sticking his head in a noose.

Then the cowboy met the attentive eyes of Judge Gore, and the mist cleared away. The judge said gravely:

"You have something to tell me in regard to this case, Kent?"

"Yes, sir. I saw Ben Moulton killed."

"Where were you at the time?"

"I was sitting on my horse, on the hillside, just above the crossing where the thing happened."

"How did you come to be there?"

"I—I was riding up toward White Pass."

"Oh!" remarked the judge in a peculiar tone; and a slow stain crept into Kent's white cheeks. "You were headed for the border, were you?"

"Yes—yes, sir."

"Tell us what you saw."

"Well, first I heard the freight whistle——"

THERE was a sudden movement, down at Kent's left. He saw a hard-faced man start to his feet. Then the man dropped back as his glance went to the bench. The judge's eyes seemed actually to pin him to his chair.

"Go on," Judge Gore said to Kent.

The cowboy continued: "As the train came in sight, and was almost to the crossing, the engineer whistled again. I could see the fireman shoveling coal. He had the fire door open. So neither one of them could possibly see what I did.

"What did you see?"

"I saw Ben Moulton come out of the brush close by and step up on the track. He was a little below the crossing, not right at it."

The room had grown so still that Kent involuntarily stopped talking.

Judge Gore spoke slowly into the silence. "You say you saw him come out of the brush, *close* by the track?"

"Yes, sir."

"But we have reliable witnesses

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here who state that there is no brush close to the track."

"No, sir, there isn't, on the right side of the track, as you go up the grade. But on the left, it grows to within a few feet of the rails. It was from the left side that Moulton came."

There was a sudden, heavy guffaw, and a voice exclaimed: "That's a devil of a story!"

Judge Gore said in a voice that was like a bright steel knife: "One more interruption from you, Ike Moulton, and you'll find yourself in difficulty." He turned to Kent.

"But the body of Ben Moulton was found on the right side of the track. Both the engineer and fireman have testified to that."

"Yes, sir, that's where it landed. I—I read something about this. The engineer said that the first he saw was Moulton's body flying through the air. He said he didn't know where it came from. He couldn't know, because neither Pr—neither the engineer nor the fireman could possibly have seen Moulton before he was struck. He just walked up on the left-hand side of the track, and the cowcatcher scooped him right up and threw him clear across the rails, in front of the engine. He kinda stumbled a coupla steps forward and threw out his arms as it hit him."

The room became very still again. The judge was watching the witness closely. Finally he spoke.

"You say the engineer whistled, not once but twice, for that crossing?"

"Yes, sir. Four long blasts each time. He always does. I've heard Price say that it's one of the most dangerous places on his run, on account of wood haulers and stray cattle, and so on."

"Then," said the judge slowly, "how do you account for the fact that Moulton stepped squarely into the path of a moving train that had just whistled within not more than a hundred feet of him?"

"Why, that's easy, Judge Gore. Ben Moulton was stone deaf."

If the room had been still before, it was like a vault now. For a long moment the gaze of the judge held Kent's. Then it turned slowly to Ike Moulton. Blood rose in the man's hard face, and he shouted:

"It's a lie! My brother could hear as well as me!"

The judge said to Kent: "You're sure about this?"

"Yes, sir. Course, maybe the folks here didn't know it. Moulton didn't trade down here. He used to take his skins across the pass to Mill Gulch, when he had any to sell. I happened to be over there one time when he was dickering with a storekeeper. You had to write out what you said or use signs. They can tell you about him in Mill Gulch."

There was a long pause before the judge spoke again. When he did, every one jumped.

"Bring Tom Brierly back here."

A man stumbled down the aisle, drops of sweat on his weak face. He babbled:

"You don't need to ask me nothin', jedge! I done it. I didn't tell all I knew. I was the only pusson in Oak Ridge that ever knew Ben Moulton; and he—he"—Brierly's forefinger bobbed hysterically toward Ike Moulton—"he paid me ten dollars not to tell that Ben was deaf. I—I needed that ten dollars, jedge; and Ike said he'd give me another ten outta the twenty thousand he was gonna get from the railroad. I—I done it, jedge."

Judge Gore said distinctly: "This case is dismissed."

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PRICE and Kent Raymer both sat still while the courtroom slowly emptied. The younger brother and sister came shyly over to Kent.

"Gosh, bud, we've missed you!"

Kent could say nothing. Now that the thing was done, he felt very tired. He wished they would hurry up and take him to jail and get it over with.

Price got out of his chair at last. For the first time Kent noticed the gray hair at his temples. He came slowly across the floor to the witness stand.

"Well, Kent," he began, "there doesn't seem much I can say." He hesitated, looking at his brother's strained face.

Judge Gore said solemnly: "Ready to give yourself up, Kent?"

"Yes, sir."

The head of Price Raymer jerked back. "Give himself up!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you talking about?"

The judge said in the same solemn tone: "It's about Bit Moses, Price."

"Bit Moses?" Price repeated. "What about him? He's still carrying his head in a sling, from the wallop that Kent gave him, but what in——"

"Still—carrying—his——" Kent gulped. He could get no further, looking from one man to the other.

There was a twinkle far back in the judge's eye.

"Thought you'd killed him, didn't you, Kent?"

Kent could only nod dumbly.

Price was staring at him. Slow color flooded up into the face of the older brother, then receded, leaving it white.

"You—you——" he stammered. "You thought you were *wanted?* For murder? And you came back to—to——"

Kent tried to laugh it off, but relief had left him dazed. He felt as if he had lifted his foot to step off into space and suddenly found solid ground under him. The judge patted a shoulder of each.

"I think you boys had better go home."

That night, after the younger brother and sister were in bed, Kent set his teeth and got it out, with as casual an air as possible.

"Price, I—I been thinking it over, and—I guess I'll take that railroad job, if I can qualify."

The older man sat still for a minute, before he asked:

"You hate it, don't you, bud?"

"Like the devil, Price. But I'll do my best."

There was another pause. Then Price spoke, sternly, to keep his voice from shaking.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that it was a cowboy who pulled me out of this hole? That there isn't a chance in a thousand that any one but a cowboy could've done it? Well," he barked, "what's the answer to that one?"

Kent came across the room and held out his hand, his tired face one wide grin."

In Next Week's Issue, "THE STAR-SHAPED STUD,"

by GUTHRIE BROWN.

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BUFFALO BAIT

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Author of "Range Brothers," etc.

BUFFALO" KIBS, scrawny, ewe-necked, bland-eyed, felt the heat of slow anger stir through his relaxed body. His countenance professed grave misgivings. It was as though the fate of a nation rested on his drooped shoulders. Which was, in fact, closely akin to the occasion. Sunset Valley was Buffalo Kibs's nation. He had lived here thirty years and more. He had fought man and nature to build up his modest BK Bar outfit. He seldom ventured far from the mountain-inclosed valley. He had congenial neighbors. A small group of honest men who, with Buffalo Kibs, had brought their meager possessions into Sunset Valley thirty-odd years ago and raised their families and cattle without regard to fences or water and land rights. Disregard of the latter had invited a dangerous menace to their happiness.

Pruitt Hawks had arrived in the valley half a decade back. There being no bank in the trade center, Three Forks, he had seen use for one. And in the course of years that followed, the banker had enjoyed a profitable venture.

Hawks seemed an affable sort of fellow from the start. He had little trouble making friends. He was, characteristically, a schemer, but it did not appear that he sought to cheat any one. He proved an agreeable money lender, did not press a

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man when times were hard. So, naturally, when he notified the ranchers of Sunset Valley as follows, it was a veritable bombshell:

DEAR SIR: It has been my grave misfortune to discover that the land upon which your cattle have been grazing was never purchased by you. My lawyers have gone into the records thoroughly, and it is my duty to advise you that thirty days hence, or as soon as you receive a final notice, you will be required to make arrangements with me to graze cattle in Sunset Valley. I have purchased from the government all of this land. As in the past, I am always at your service.

Sincerely, PRUITT HAWKS.

Great weariness possessed Buffalo Kibs's spare frame as he leaned back in the chair. But in his eyes there arose an abundance of anger and disgust.

"Pruitt Hawks," he croaked wrathfully, "you're a skunk an' a polecat an' a coyote stuffed into a rattler's hide. We settled in this here valley more'n thirty year ago. It ain't right that a man can take it from us."

Pruitt Hawks flushed deeply. He chewed on a fat cigar and knocked a generous coating of ashes on his vest. He exhaled a ragged ball of smoke, narrowed his shrewd eyes, wiggled a fat forefinger at Kibs.

"See here, now, Mr. Kibs. It's not my fault that you men didn't make arrangements for that land. Unfortunately, I stumbled across the records. I happen to be in business to make money. That is all I have to say. As I told you, I must have fifty per cent of the calf crop each year for land rental. I would be losing money if I rented it cheaper. I could stock that land myself. You see, there is no alernative. I must protect the stockholders of this institution."

Buffalo Kibs snorted in ardent disgust. The stockholders, he well knew, consisted of one Pruitt Hawks.

"Consarn it, Mr. Hawks," Buffalo said evenly, "you're gonna ruin a life time of work for us. Don't that mean nothin' to you? Give us this year. We're just gettin' over the drouth. Our cattle ain't in fit shape to put on the trail, an' we'll go broke if we agree to yore proposition."

"Sorry. Not my way of doing business." Hawks's tone had become clipped.

To say that Buffalo Kibs was exasperated would be but a mild estimate of his internal eruption. A florid hue rose through the saddle-brown coating of his face. His calloused finger tips thumped against the palms of his hands. He stood up, tight-lipped, and stalked out of the bank.

BITTERNESS filled Buffalo as he headed homeward. The hoofs beneath him were ripping up the dust on Cripple Creek trail. The ragged inequalities of the Wagon Wheel mountains rose about him.

Five men awaited at Buffalo's shack, there at the end of the trail. Buffalo had been elected as a committee of one to confer with Banker Hawks. And his countenance was gloomy as he thought of the message that he must deliver.

Arriving at Little Squaw Bend, the old cowman pulled to a halt. Following a brief consideration, he veered off Cripple Creek trail and rode straight for Bowie Pass. Somberly he watched the approach of the knife-cut defile, gnawing gingerly at the wad of plug cut inside his thin cheek. Wild thoughts ran amuck through his mind.

On Comanche Bench, he pulled up and slid to the ground. Beneath

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him a few hundred feet, a cultivated section of land held his gaze. Pruitt Hawks had a fine layout down there.

The big rock house was covered with garlands of shadow from a trim row of poplars. The corrals, farther back, were orderly in structure, and the barns stood out with architectural preciseness. The graze pastures were girded by eight-foot wire fences. These fences had been meticulously made smooth so that no wire spur might deface the velvet hide of a blue blood. The broad backs of the white-faces were like small pads of red plush. And near the barns a herd of fine steel-dusts stood with arrogant unconcern.

A pretty outfit, Buffalo Kibs concluded. One section of land encompassing two hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock. A most worthy hobby for one of wealth. An outfit of which a man might well be jealously proud. Buffalo held little doubt but that wrath would surge to an intense pitch in the Hawks household if that verdant spot were tampered with.

Suddenly, in the midst of his somber musings, Buffalo Kibs chuckled. There wasn't an iota of humor attached to this cackling outburst. It didn't hold the hollow timber of rage. It was more like the emotional outburst of one facing certain defeat. His eyes were thinned as he swung to the saddle and headed once again for the BK Bar.

The five men were perched like mute gnomes on the corral fence as Buffalo dismounted. Tom Mathews, Jim Gilson, Ryan Galt, "Hash" Steubins, and Chet Harlow. This grim-faced quintet, like Buffalo Kibs, owned small cattle ranches in Sunset Valley. Of the five, not one could boast of individual power. Lashed together, they would form a more formidable foe.

"What did he say?" asked Ryan Galt tonelessly.

Buffalo Kibs wagged his head, and his face assumed a preposterous air of solemnity.

"We lose," he answered simply. "Pruitt Hawks says so."

"Well—dag-gunit!" Jim Gilson exploded. "The contemptible skinflint! He can't do that."

"Yeah," Buffalo countered, "he can do it all right. The milk of kindness has done curled in his onery soul. He's a slick hombre. Yes, sir! Law is law. He knows he's got the law behind his play. That's what is gonna make it tough. In thirty days or so, he'll get full title to the land. Until then we can play around like we usta. After that ——" Buffalo shrugged dispiritedly.

"But can't we do somethin'?" shouted Ryan Galt. "Can't we take it to court? There must be a law agin' pitchin' a man out of his own house."

"Don't possession mean nothin' in this man's country?" Hash Steubins demanded. "Time was when such arguments could be judged by old Judge Colt."

Buffalo Kibs waved the men down.

" 'Tain't so no more. Lessn you pay yore rent, you can be thrown out. Half the calf crop is what Hawks wants as rent."

"Jerusalem!" thundered Jim Gilson. "We couldn't last two years doing that. Why, that lop-eared, sawed-off, hammer-headed cayuse!"

"Ain't no sense losing your head, Jim," counseled Chet Harlow quietly. "There must be some way we can deal with Hawks."

"Might be a way," Buffalo confided.

There was an off-key timbre in

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Buffalo's voice. His five companions recognized it and searched his impassive face. They all knew that when Buffalo Kibs spoke in that intangibly queer way, there was profound thought back of the words.

"Spill it," challenged Jim Gilson.

"Huh? Oh, dunno. Might be a chance, is all. A gambling chance. That's all I'd call it. Slim, too. Kinda like a eighteen-hand mustang trottin' on stilts. I reckon you fellas wouldn't care to gamble that strong, though. Me, I'd go for it. But you-all've got families."

"Come on, you old leather-head. You gotta idea. Spill it," Gilson urged.

Buffalo nibbled at a match end at some length before speaking.

"We only got a gamblin' chance," he said presently. "Then why not gamble?"

"How?"

Buffalo wheeled his gaze slowly from man to man. He flipped the match from his fingers.

"Hoss race," he announced flatly.

"You mean——"

"I mean gamble our cattle agin' the land he's gonna own."

Buffalo's companions eyed him critically.

"Ain't one of us owns a cayuse that could nose out that steel-dust he calls Star Hawk. That there critter is a shade faster'n a streak of lightning."

Buffalo Kibs knew this. He had seen the gelding, Star Hawk, flatten to true running form. Indubitably the animal was the fastest in Sunset Valley. Nevertheless the old cowman jerked a thumb back at his rangy sorrel.

"Big Red there can shake a right smart leg. Was he to be put hard, he might make a race of it. Course, like I told you, we gotta gamble. I ain't blamin' you jaspers none if you ain't got the nerve."

"Nerve!" snorted Ryan Galt, nibbling at Buffalo's wily bait. "Who said we ain't got the nerve? That ain't it, is it, fellers?"

Four heads swung curtly to agreement. Buffalo Kibs studied his companions keenly. He walked briskly toward Big Red.

"Done," he said crisply. "Wait here."

BUFFALO'S firm step ended at Pruitt Hawks's desk. The banker looked surprised, but this he attempted to hide.

Without preliminaries, Buffalo Kibs came to the point.

"You think right smart of that steel-dust gelding, Star Hawk, don't you?"

Pruitt Hawks looked nonplused, but said with admirable calm:

"I think he's pretty fast, if that is what you're driving at."

"That there sorrel out there," Buffalo asserted bluntly, "can run him as ragged as a two-bit burro."

Pruitt Hawks had a valued opinion of his steel-dust. But his eyes narrowed shrewdly, as if something forewarned him to be prudent. He cautioned himself against being influenced by his own opinion of the animal's prowess.

"Don't look like a race horse to me," Hawks dissented, after a moment's hesitation. "I've seen you ride him. But what are you driving at?"

For just an instant the old range rider hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders.

"How heavy would you say that Big Red can't beat Star Hawk?"

The banker's brain was full of quick suspicion, and his eyes grew chill and hard and calculating.

"Now I just ain't quite got the

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savvy, Mr. Kibs. Or have I? You mean you'd like to wager that Big Red can outrun my Star Hawk in a straight running race?"

"I was hoping you'd understand," Buffalo confided blandly. "We'd like to bet just that."

Pruitt Hawks beat a soft tattoo on the floor with one heel.

"We? Meaning who?"

"Jim Gilson, Tom Mathews, Hash Steubins, Ryan Galt, Chet Harlow, and me. We got around ten thousand head of cattle between us. The cattle won't do us no good without Sunset Valley. We're ready to shoot the works. Course, likely that's too big a gamble for you. The boys said as how it might be. Our cattle against clear title to the land."

It didn't take Hawks long to decide. He raised slightly in his chair and glanced out at Big Red. The gaunt sorrel looked anything but lively. Settling back, Hawks smiled benignantly.

"Well now, Mr. Kibs, that seems like a fair proposition for one and all concerned. Maybe that sorrel of yours can run. I always figured there were only two kinds of horses. Fast and slow ones. Big Red there don't exactly look like a slow one. Now this here is going to be a straight race, no give or take from start to finish?"

Buffalo Kibs nodded.

"You fix up the necessary papers and we-all will be in to-morrow to sign 'em."

He allowed Big Red to choose a leisurely pace homeward. There seemed an added burden on Buffalo's shoulders, one which was actually affecting his equilibrium. He sensed the feeling of a tight-rope walker who, carrying a precious load across an abysmal chasm, had lost his balancing rod.

The sun, as Buffalo reached the BK Bar, was disappearing beyond eye reach. Like a wise man whose vision had encompassed all, the boiling pendulum was retiring, dragging its long cloak of fiery red into oblivion. Shadows were deepening, and the air was growing cool.

Buffalo Kibs had a glum nod for his five neighbors.

"It's did," he remarked with a clipped but weary tone. "We sign the agreement to-morrow."

Big Red seemed utterly impervious to the intense inspection to which he was immediately subjected. Tough and rangy, scarred with barbed wire, cactus, the razor tips of horns, his muscles were like steely springs, his feet cast for fast running.

But the question that swirled through five minds was: "Fast enough?"

The sixth mind, that of Buffalo Kibs, knew the answer: "No."

BUFFALO KIBS said that he could see nothing to be gained by delaying the race. In this the banker was agreeable, although there lurked behind his heavy-lidded gaze a measure of suspicion.

Hawks knew that Big Red didn't have a Chinaman's chance with Star Hawk. It was inconceivable. A range plug against a blue blood. Pruitt Hawks chuckled as he supervised the loading of Star Hawk into a gated wagon. Very carefully, on the way to town, he recalled each word in that signed and attested agreement.

To whom it may concern, that we, the undersigned, join in the following covenants. To wit:

That a race between Big Red, a horse owned by one Buffalo Kibs, and Star Hawk, a steel-dust gelding owned by one Pruitt Hawks, shall be held on this day on the prairie flat east of the town of

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Three Forks. That the length of said race shall be one mile.

It is further agreed that if the horse Big Red wins, the said owner of Star Hawk agrees to relinquish all claims to the land commonly referred to as Sunset Valley, which he, Pruitt Hawks, has recently agreed to purchase from the Federal government, and to deed said property to the six men whose names appear in common below. On the other hand, if Star Hawk wins the race, the six aforementioned men shall deliver to Pruitt Hawks, at his residence, all cattle owned by them with clear title to same.

Pruitt Hawks chuckled audibly. Try as he might, he could find no weak point in the agreement. The signatures had been duly witnessed and attested. There could be no slip-up at all!

Buffalo Kibs had suggested a change or two in the original draft. But it was still water-tight.

IT was late in the afternoon, and Three Forks had the dismal appearance of a ghost town. No citizens were to be seen. All the stores and saloons were locked. The entire populace had turned out to witness the race.

A mile had been carefully measured off with a fifty-foot length of rope on the flat east of town. Banker Hawks had supervised the work.

"You satisfied?" Hawks asked of Buffalo Kibs.

"Reckon everything is all right," agreed Buffalo. "Bring your horse over."

It wasn't long until both horses were at the starting line. Big Red wore his regular saddle with Buffalo Kibs up. The rangy sorrel had not caught the tenseness of the moment.

Star Hawk was loaded lightly. The small hull appeared no heavier than a man's Stetson. One of Pruitt Hawks's stable men was up on the steel-dust gelding. Quivering beneath his small rider, Star Hawk was tense for a spring down the course.

"Let 'er go," croaked Buffalo Kibs.

Hawks nodded.

The gun barked.

Star Hawk was off like a slender bird knifing the wind, found his stride instantly. But Big Red had been trained to shoot ahead like a bullet without further warning than a slight spur brush. One moment standing at apparent ease, the next instant the scarred sorrel was neck and neck with Star Hawk seventy-five yards down the course.

Buffalo heard the voices of his friends rise in an encouraging tumult. He leaned forward, patting Big Red on the shoulder. The sorrel let loose with another notch of speed. But Kibs knew, without a sideward glance, that the steel-dust was gradually pulling away. The shadow of the flashing tail was even with Big Red's pounding forehoofs.

Buffalo tried to urge his mount to a yet greater speed, but Big Red was unselfishly giving his best. Star Hawk was ripping up the prairie dust and throwing it back against Buffalo's tight lips.

At the halfway mark, Star Hawk led by two lengths. At the finish, six lengths. Big Red had been beaten. But not Buffalo Kibs.

The old cowman remained at the finish line, while the crowd acclaimed its hero. Buffalo mustered a cautious grin of contrition as the quintet of ranchers rode up. Before any one had a chance to voice his opinion, Buffalo held up a hand and said:

"Now that the horseplay is over, we'll take a stab at that gambler's chance I was tellin' you about. C'mon, men. We got a night's work ahead."

"Whoa!" shouted Ryan Galt a bit

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savagely. "What you meanin', Buffalo? Don't that agreement give Pruitt Hawks all our cattle?"

Buffalo nodded.

"Yeah," he acknowledged with a shrewd eye twinkle. "An' what I'm trying to tell you is that we got work to do."

"We stay right here until you do some explaining," Jim Gilson declared heatedly.

Chuckling, Buffalo Kibs twirled a smoke.

"Lemme ask you first if you-all got your cattle bunched like you promised?"

The five men nodded, and Buffalo drew closer and talked swiftly for a few moments. He brought out his plan in sketchy form. When he had finished, there was the ghost of a grin on Jim Gilson's mouth. Ryan Galt struck a match on his boot heel and offered it to Buffalo. Chet Harlow was talking it over with Hash Steubins and Tom Mathews.

"What do you think, men?" questioned Jim Gilson.

Hash Steubins spoke up:

"Like Buffalo done said, it's a gamble. This here race——"

"Bait," cut in Gilson humorously. "Just bait."

"You never did figure Big Red could beat Star Hawk," Chet Harlow accused.

Buffalo's lips parted in a dry chuckle. And then he swung Big Red toward the BK Bar.

"See you-all in Pronto Canyon afore sunup," he called back over his shoulder.

PRONTO CANYON was two miles north of Pruitt Hawks's place. In the cool hours before dawn a faint stirring began there. A sort of shuffling, clacking sound rose against the craggy escarpments. Denizens of the wilds were disturbed before their waking hours and were slinking off at a distance to view in awe this unusual occurrence in the shadowed canyon.

Great blobs of cattle surged in a lowing wave through the east neck of the mountain passage and were pushed toward the center. Others came in at a dead run, and the small hub grew to gigantic, swirling mass. A startled bellow rose, but quickly subsided. A man's yell of rage echoed to the upper reaches.

Men down there were sweating. Three were circling the big herd while others galloped back for more. An hour before the sun would stripe the canyon rim with fire, all was in readiness.

Pruitt Hawks was sleeping soundly in that early morning hour. Perhaps his dreams were concerned with a veritable sea of cattle, his by virtue of a wager. Certainly his dreams could not have imagined such a prompt delivery.

Hawks was rudely awakened by the frantic shouts of one of his hostlers.

"Oh, Mr. Hawks. Mr. Hawks!" the man cried.

Pruitt Hawks was angered by this early intrusion.

He tumbled from bed and stalked to a window and looked down. He opened his mouth to shout something, and then he saw, and the sight choked him to silence.

Cattle! Thousands of them roaming the pastures cultivated for his blooded stock. A sea of horns waved grotesquely. A mass of range-tough bodies concealed the velvety coats of his white-faces. The air quivered with lifted bellows. Chokingly Pruitt Hawks roared his surprise and made a dive for his clothes.

The heavy door of his house slammed noisily as he shot though

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on a dead run. The hostler, sensing the impending tempest, had vanished. Pruitt Hawks, clothes askew, hair uncombed, face a brick red, was searching vainly for some one upon which to vent his spleen. The fact that no human could be seen served only to further his exasperation. He ran clumsily for the stables.

"Saddle a horse for me," he roared at a thunderstruck hostler.

Bareheaded, the banker rode at a fast clip through the cool morning air. He aroused Buffalo Kibs from an exhausted slumber.

"Huh——" Kibs raised from his cot, massaging his eyes with the tips of his fingers.

"You know why I'm here!" shrieked Hawks. "What do you mean? What do you mean, throwing those scurvy cattle in with my blooded stock? I'll have the lot of you thrown in jail. I've spent two hundred thousand dollars building up my herd. I'll not have it contaminated. Get your cattle off my place?"

"Our cattle?" Buffalo Kibs seemed utterly at a loss. "Why, Mr. Hawks, don't you remember? You won those cattle on a hoss race yesterday. Big Red and Star Hawk——"

But the irate Mr. Hawks was again yelling:

"There was nothing said about throwing them onto my land!"

Buffalo Kibs stood up and yanked on his trousers. He was extremely self-possessed.

"Your memory seems sorta failing, Mr. Hawks," he recited coolly. "Here is a copy of the agreement. Lemme read a few lines to you.

"—the six aforementioned men shall deliver to Pruitt Hawks, at his residence, all cattle owned by them with clear title to same.

"Now we was just carrying out our part of the bargain, Mr. Hawks. Don't get so all-fired het up. We'll be down this morning an' sign the cattle over to you."

Pruitt Hawks floundered helplessly for words. He was chewing on a fat cigar which he had never lighted. His eyes were shifting like balls of mercury. They ceased rolling, grew calm, shrewd. His lips parted with guile. Buffalo Kibs was pinned by his calculating gaze.

"All right," exclaimed Hawks in a hoarse whisper. "All right. All this land is mine. I'll just drive the cattle back out."

Buffalo Kibs shook his head and grinned.

"Not for thirty days or so the land ain't yours. You ain't got the papers back on it yet. Besides, how are you gonna drive that many cattle by yourself? We aim to protect this land until some jasper can show the papers on it."

Buffalo perceived a vague hint of apoplexy in the banker's trembling body. Like a lofty pinnacle shorn of its stanch underpinning, Pruitt Hawks looked ready to topple.

"I'm not licked," the banker hissed unconvincingly. "Not yet I'm not. You'll pay for this, Buffalo Kibs. You'll pay a mighty dear price, too. If my white-faces are injured by that—that herd of mongrels, I'll have you behind bars."

From some inexhaustable source, Hawks summoned a new fit of helpless rage. He passed noisily outside and thundered away.

BUFFALO KIBS, an impish grin drawing his lips out of line, walked back through his long shack. In another room, in varied postures of slumber on the floor, some dozen or so cowhands and ranch owners breathed deeply.

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Ryan Galt, disturbed by Buffalo's step, raised on one elbow.

"He were here," Kibs said. "He was persperatin' some, too. Plumb ornery-minded, he was. I got a hunch he's gone lookin' for you jaspers. Tuck yorese'f back in. Pruitt Hawks is about to make a big decision. It's eatin' on him right smart."

Buffalo crawled back on his cot and slept another hour. He was aroused by the quick thump of boot heels outside. Pruitt Hawks, without knocking, strode into the room.

Buffalo could not miss the change in the mien of the banker from Three Forks. He resembled a proud steer which had been unceremoniously busted by a cayuse half its weight.

"Now, Mr. Kibs, see here—ah—Buffalo. I've been a bit hasty perhaps. My price on the land rental was out of reason. Much too high. Say we arbitrate at one third the calf crop? Now wouldn't you consider that a fair proposition?" He examined eagerly the yawning face of Buffalo Kibs.

"Naw-w," yawned Buffalo. "Naw, I reckon not. You see, Mr. Hawks, we-all's decided agin' being cattlemen. It's such a relief to get disinextricated from that there bunch of beef that we feel like a herd of younkers again. Naw, I don't reckon we want 'em."

"But—but see here, man. What will I do? My blooded white-faces—disease—they might get infected."

Buffalo shrugged. There was nothing in his attitude to indicate the slightest concern.

"You see, Mr. Hawks, without this here land we just ain't interested." Buffalo slumped back on the cot.

"Land?" The word was a mere whisper. Pruitt Hawks paced the floor. Perspiration gleamed across his ridged forehead. A grim perspective crossed his vision—a plague among blue bloods, wiping them out. "I—I'll give you that land back. But get those cattle off my pastures."

Buffalo Kibs hardened his eyes.

"We don't aim for you to give us anything, Mr. Hawks. But we'll buy that land from you. We'll give you ten dollars on the hundred more'n it cost you. That'll be a legal commission on such a transaction. An' we want five years to pay it out. Six per cent interest bearing notes. That's our proposition flat. Take it or leave it."

Buffalo's eyes sheathed their interest. Actually his blood was racing.

"Take it or leave it!" exclaimed Pruitt Hawks feverishly. "Take it! I'll take it. But get those cattle danged——"

With a blood-chilling whoop, Buffalo Kibs was on his feet. He raced back through the house with great strides.

"Go get 'em!" yelped Buffalo gleefully. "Pronto. An' fix them fences back like they was." His exhuberance was profound.

There was a mad scramble toward the stables. For the next few moments the air was alive with pounding hoofs. The silence came abruptly, and Buffalo Kibs walked back to Pruitt Hawks.

"I reckon," the old cowman advised the banker, "we can ride into Three Forks and get them papers fixed up now."

The face of Pruitt Hawks expressed a long-sought relief.

"I tell you, Mr. Kibs—ah—Buffalo, I'd like to shake your hand."

Without hesitation, Buffalo extended a calloused hand. As they

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struck a long lope for Three Forks, the banker shouted:

"You don't suppose the boy'll all be mad at me, do you?"

Buffalo roared out:

"Mad? You'll never have such friends as they'll be. Friendship is founded on mutual respect or agreement. Man an' boy, we've never had such fun since that hurricane in '98. More fun than a cayuse could ride around in a week of Tuesdays."

HUGE STONE MOVED FROM CAVE MUMMY

THE huge rock that crushed out the life of an aboriginal miner in a cavern at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, hundreds of years ago was successfully removed recently by scientists.

The mummy, preserved in the chill, dry air of the cave, was discovered several months ago, part of the body projecting from under the stone. Alonzo W. Pond, archeologist of the national park service, said the part of the body that had been under the stone was not so well preserved as had been hoped. The boulder weighed seven tons.

Pond said indications were the aborigine had been killed some five hundred or more years ago.

In Next Week's Issue

A Complete Novel

GUN-SMOKE MESA

By H. C. WIRE

Clint Brady, at twenty-five, finds himself boss of the JN spread, with a range war coming up.

THE STAR-SHAPED STUD

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Pat Connel was an A-1 cowhand and a square shooter, but his boss thought he was too pugnacious for the outfit.

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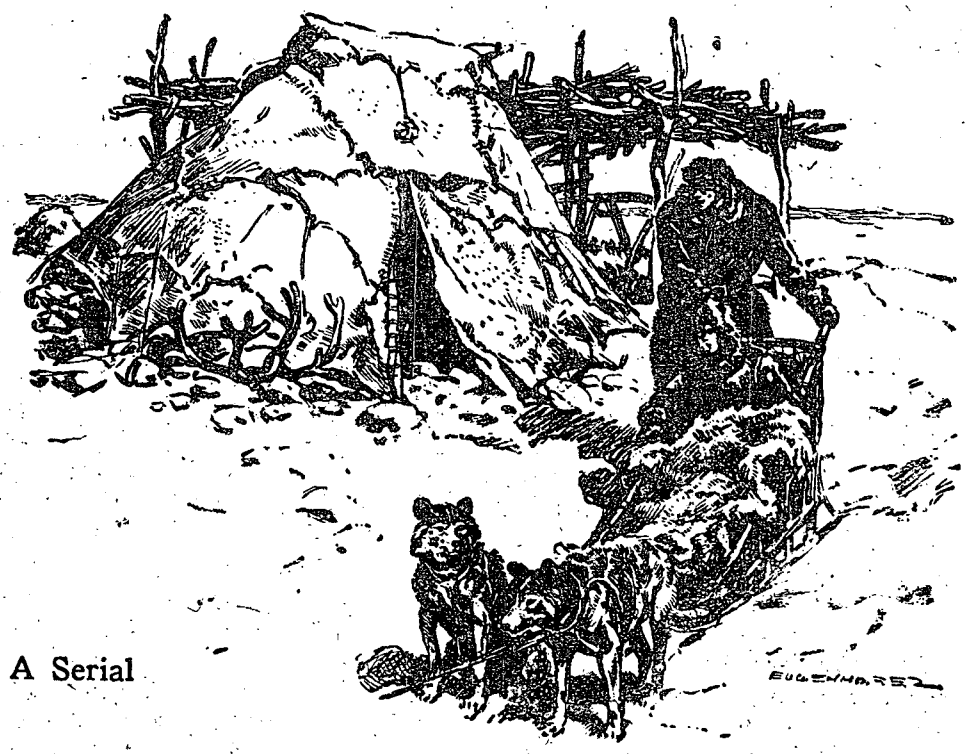

A Serial

BROKEN PATROL

By SETH RANGER

MOUNTED patrols, sent to Lost Hope Bay, where a mysterious fur raider, Dunak, is operating, have failed to return or report. Tales have come back that the policemen have gone native. Superintendent Blake sends Constables Matt Cronin and Al Kirby to investigate. Months later natives bring in Cronin, reporting that he killed and buried Kirby, and is himself "sick in the head," from a wound that has healed outwardly. Cronin is charged with murder, but adjudged insane.

Blake thinks that Cronin might return to normal if sent on a short patrol under supervision, and arranges to try this experiment. A man named Kennedy is to trail Cronin unseen by him and keep a constant watch on the constable.

Soon after their departure, word comes back that Kennedy has been found dead, apparently murdered by Cronin, and that the Mounty has disappeared. A later message says that Constable Boggs, who made this report, has also vanished.

Cronin appears at the cabin of the girl he loves—Alice Kirby, twin sister of the missing Al Kirby. She finds that Cronin's mind is mostly blank from a period beginning some-

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time after he left Cree Post with her brother, and that he is now determined to finish that uncompleted patrol. She accompanies him in order to ascertain her brother's fate.

At Cree Post they stop for a day with the trader, Sam Dexter, known as the "Bishop." There they meet Jacques Cochet, ruler of the Dismal Lake country, whom they suspect may be the mysterious Dunak. Alice and Matt mush on, accompanied by Akadriak, a friendly Eskimo. One night Akadriak is murdered as they sleep.

They discover Al Kirby's grave, and Alice accuses Matt of murdering him. Suddenly she flees from him, and he runs after the girl, calling to her. Alice reaches a stone cabin where she is greeted by an outlaw wearing a Mounty uniform. The renegade attacks Matt and is shot and killed by the Mounty just as Matt himself is rendered unconscious by a blow on the head.

Returning to consciousness, Matt remembers nothing that has happened since he received the head wound, months before. He now realizes that he and Al Kirby each had been tricked into believing the other was drinking and brawling with the natives—which had caused their quarrel. In reality, each had seen some renegade in a Mounty uniform.

While Alice and Matt are at the cabin, a wounded man arrives, saying that he was knifed by Cochet. The man, named Garvin, dies before Matt can question him.

Matt captures three other renegades who come to the cabin. Two of them are wearing Mounty uniforms. They confess they are working for Dunak. In order to hold them prisoner, Matt leaves them without outer clothing, while he and Alice mush on.

The mysterious Dunak murders the three prisoners Matt has left behind, then raids the Mounty's camp at night, taking all the grub. Without food for themselves or their dogs, Matt and Alice push on toward Lost Hope Bay. Blackie, one of the dogs, attacks the girl, but the others turn on him and kill him.

CHAPTER XI.

LOST HOPE BAY.

MATT turned his attention to the dogs. The renegade had paid for his treachery with his life. Itkilik and Moose were contrite, the others wary, expecting punishment.

"It could have turned out worse," Matt observed. "Our nerves had long passed the breaking point."

"Nothing seems real," Alice said, "and yet everything seems so important. It's all like a terrible nightmare. You are vague, Matt, a dream. You don't seem real now." She reached out and touched his arm. "I've touched people in dreams, and it felt the same way."

"Perhaps you can sleep," he urged. "I'm going to save the tea leaves. Their strength is about gone, but at least they'll give hot water a taste if boiled long enough."

She was asleep when he turned in. Almost immediately Matt felt himself drift briefly through space, then plunge into a black abyss filled with snarling wolves and defenseless girls fighting them off.

Matt awakened to find the dogs harnessed and waiting. Alice sat on the sled, covering him with his own service gun.

"Are you crazy, Alice?" he hoarsely demanded. "Put up that gun."

"No, I'm not crazy," she an-

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swered. "In fact, a night's rest and the tea has opened my eyes. I'm thinking clearly for the first time in days. It's gallant of you to let me ride on the sled, but it isn't practical. When we reach the arctic, you'll need your strength to get food. If that strength has been wasted making the trail easier for me, it'll be a pleasant memory. Something to write poems about, but useless in the final analysis."

"And the gun is to emphasis your sincerity," he suggested, with a trace of a smile. "Of course, dead, I will be of small value."

"Then will you be sensible about this?" she asked. "On sheer nerve I'm good for a couple of days yet. And the rest might put you in condition to kill a caribou or seal if you have the chance."

"I think you're right," he conceded, "but it goes against the grain for you to walk while I ride."

"We're up against more than the grain," she observed. "It's survival. I've said it before and I shall keep saying it. We mustn't forget it for a moment."

He lashed his sleeping bag to the sled, helped the dogs break clear, then jumped aboard. He pulled the robes about him and fell asleep almost immediately.

Progress was painfully slow. Blackie had died a traitor's death, but nevertheless his strength had contributed materially in moving the load. Both Itkilik and Moose were in harness, but to the tired girl it seemed an eternity passed before she drew abreast of bends a mile or two ahead. The sled runners screamed an incessant dirge on the ice. The dogs plodded with heads down and tails dragging. Alice could only think of skeletons covered with fur and held up by harness.

VAGUE periods of unconsciousness gripped her late that afternoon and the following morning. She clung to the sled, lashed by a deep, fighting instinct—the ever-present will to survive.

"Alice!" Matt's voice aroused her. "You've got to ride now. I'm fine. Strong as ever."

Strong as ever! She caught her breath. His eyes were retreating into their sockets, his skin drawn tightly across lips and cheek bones.

"You walk to-morrow," she answered. "I've learned to doze standing up."

Ahead the fog drifted uncertainly, coating everything it touched with ice. Possibly it was imagination, but she thought she heard the sharp boom of breaking ice. The fog rolled back, and she rubbed her eyes and saw a bleak headland and ice piled high at its base. But she wanted to make sure, and not fill Matt's breast with unfounded hopes.

The fog drifted around until she could no longer see the lead dog. Itkilik moved ahead, guided by instinct. Moose followed, dragging one foot which had ice balls between the toes. He wanted to turn to the west, but was too exhausted to make a point of it.

A breeze came from somewhere, cold and damp. Alice watched the fog drift, and suddenly the headland was clear and she saw an open space littered with broken ice, and then another headland.

"Matt!" she screamed hysterically. "We're here! Matt!" Then everything went black, and the sled moved on, leaving a pathetic, crumpled heap of fur sprawled on the river ice.

Matt Cronin rolled from the sled and stopped the dogs, then he stumbled back.

"I'm all right, Matt," she whis-

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pered; "just fainted when I saw we'd reached the arctic. We have, haven't we?"

"This is Fish Creek. There's no doubt. I can see igloos," he assured her.

"But can you hear dogs?" she sharply demanded. "If you can't hear dogs, the village is deserted."

From the first Matt Cronin had feared a deserted village—Eskimos frightened from their homes by Dunak's threats. But even so there must be food. There *had* to be food of some nature.

Matt helped Alice on the sled and then mushed on. He stopped in front of the nearest igloo. Each igloo had been located on high ground so that the wind would keep it clear of snow. They were constructed of driftwood and sod, roofed with walrus hides held in place by sealskin lines from which were suspended heavy rocks to serve as anchors.

He forced his way into the igloo and looked around. Everything was frozen solid.

"Nothing here," he reported, then went on to the next.

Alice, unable to stand the suspense, spread out the map. She sensed Dunak's sinister hand. As disease had not wiped out the population, and as the igloos were permanent and good fishing was at their very doors, fear was the only explanation.

He returned, shrugging his shoulders expressively.

"Everybody pulled out and took their belongings with them. I've got a chunk of walrus hide from one of the roofs," he said. "We might stew that up."

Stomachs revolted at the prospect, but the demands of hunger were beginning to know no limits.

"How long since this village was occupied?" she asked.

"Two or three years at least," he answered. "These people have been frightened out."

"And probably the same is true of the village at Lost Hope Bay," she suggested. "And I haven't strength enough to go that far."

It logically followed that if the natives quit this village with its fine fishing, the tribe at the less-favored Lost Hope Bay would also quit under threats.

MATT seated himself beside her on the sled and stared speculatively at the bay. Police training intruded even in this dire hour.

"If the natives were chased out, there's a reason, and the reason isn't far," he said. "There's food cached there probably. Our problem is to find it and get the jump on whoever is guarding it." He walked over to Itkilik and Moose. "Here's where you come in," he said. "We'll try Itkilik first."

"No," she objected, "let's see what Moose will do. The last two days I've been in pretty much of a fog, but I seem to remember Moose swinging away from the river. Itkilik was in the lead, and Moose didn't resist."

Moose was released, and Matt built a fire and boiled the tea leaves again. They drank the brew and felt somewhat better. Moose made no effort to get to his feet so long as the fire burned. When he was satisfied no food was forthcoming, he got up and limped away. No dog made an effort to follow him until Matt cracked the whip.

Slowly they got to their feet and with Matt's help broke the sled clear.

"I won't ride," Alice resolutely declared; "the ground is rough, and it's all the dogs can do to pull the sled."

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"They're pretty weak," he conceded.

Moose walked a half mile, then lay down. The other dogs dropped in their tracks. Alice sank down on the nearest hummock and stared ahead. There was nothing but ice, cold fog, and death, it seemed.

Driven by some inward force, Moose got to his feet again and pushed on. Matt forced the others to follow, then pulled Alice to her feet. There seemed nothing real about them. Their fur garments and the dogs' coats glistened with ice. It was a ghostly sight—a lone dog, followed by a team, then a man and a girl.

When the lone dog dropped, the others dropped; when he went on, the others followed. In the distance the ice groaned and roared as floes contended with the rock-bound shore.

"He's lost," Alice said dejectedly. "After three hours of crawling over the icy ground, Moose is lost."

An inlet drove deep into the shore at this point. It was nearly two miles long and a mile in width. Ice piled high choked the entrance. Desolation lay on all sides, and there was no sign of human habitation, yet Moose squatted down near a pile of ice and looked hopefully at Matt, as if expecting something to happen.

"This inlet isn't on the charts," Matt said. "If it is Lost Hope Bay, then my map is wrong."

"Matt!" Alice's voice shook with excitement. "Isn't that dog standing near the bow of an ice-coated wreck? That heavy piece of projecting ice could be the bowsprit. The ice below rounds out like a ship's bows."

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "I believe you're right. A wrecked whaler, probably. The ice pack drove it ashore, and it's worked deep into the sand."

MATT picked up the ax lashed to the sled and walked over to the mass. Tons of ice pressed in on all sides save that nearest the inlet. Here the break in the ship was roughly outlined. A stub of a mast protruded three feet above the ice-coated deck.

Matt stepped before the probable location of the cabin door and began chopping. As the slabs fell away, Alice on hands and knees pushed them aside.

"There's a porthole," he shouted. "It's too small to crawl through, though. I think I can see the door through the ice now. Significant, isn't it, that Moose would come here? It proves he's been here before—has been fed here."

"But why?" she asked.

"I've got an opinion I'm almost afraid to voice—it's too good to be true," he answered. "This old ship may be the source of Dunak's food supply. Logically enough he would keep it a secret, and the first thing he'd do would be to run the natives out of the country."

"How long do you suppose it has been here?" she asked.

"I've no idea," he answered. "The ice pack forced it ashore, then snow, drifting down from that cliff, covered it. Some years the snow may have melted enough to reveal parts of the wreck. But there have been years on end when no trace of it was visible."

Alice was familiar with the facts as well as legends of lost arctic vessels. Caught in the floes, some were crushed and immediately sank. Others were lifted up by the pressure and carried by the ice deep into the arctic basin. Mostly they were never heard of again. But occa-

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sionally a ship returned with the ice —a ghost ship of ice-coated spars and deck houses, sometimes manned by frozen sailors.

Matt cleared the ice away from the door.

"Look, Alice. This door has been forced open within the last few months. See the scratches on the brass near the knob? Take my revolver and be ready for anything—some one may be inside."

Matt struck the door several times with the end of the ax handle. The battering broke the ice freezing the door to the jamb. He turned the knob and hurled his weight against it. The next instant he sprawled on a cabin floor. Cold, heavy air filled his nostrils and started him coughing. The tomb-like silence of the place was depressing. He got to his feet and struck a match. Alice's sharp cry, almost instantly smothered by her mitted hand, rasped his edged nerves.

"Matt! There's somebody sitting at the table," she managed to say.

The match died, and Matt struck another. He saw a figure, dressed in scarlet and gold, sitting in a chair. One arm rested on the table, and a few inches away stood a bottle holding a half-burned candle.

"It's Constable Stanley," Matt said. "He was ordered, by Indian runner, to include Lost Hope Bay on his return from the Herschel Island patrol. It is known he left Herschel Island, but he vanished, and until this moment no member of the Force has known whether the Indian runner met him or not."

As Matt talked, he held the match to the candle wick. It lighted, casting eerie shadows against the heavily timbered cabin walls.

"Was he murdered?" Alice asked.

"He appears to have laid aside a book, closed his eyes, and died," Matt answered. "But he nearly starved to death before he got here. Look at the sunken cheeks and thin wrists."

Extreme cold had preserved the body. It was frozen solid and required their combined efforts to remove it to a temporary place outside.

"Alice, if you'll rummage around and locate something that looks like food, I'll clear the ice from the stove-pipe and get a fire going," Matt said. "What we need more than anything else now is warmth, then something that'll make soup."

IT required an hour's chopping to clear the ice from the battered pipe protruding from the cabin. Matt started a coal fire in the stove, then joined the girl, who was completing a thorough search through lockers.

"I haven't found a scrap of food," she informed him, "except some frozen blubber that was in a pan on the stove. It wasn't fit for the dogs."

"Let's try some of these adjoining cabins," he suggested.

A series of small rooms opened on the main cabin, which also had served as a dining room for the officers of the vessel. The galley adjoined, but it was apparent Stanley had done his cooking on the coal stove that supplied the cabin with heat.

The doors refused to open, and Matt went after them with an iron bar.

"Ice pressure has jammed them," he said. "Give me a hand. Now—heave!"

Under their combined efforts the first door snapped open. For several tense seconds Alice and Matt could only stare. The small cabin was packed tight with baled fur. Sable,

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silver fox, marten, mink, and fisher —the choicest a vast country could yield.

"Dunak's cache!" Matt exclaimed. "I knew it had to be up here somewhere, but an ice-locked schooner is the one cache that was never suggested. Let's see what's in the next cabin."

One by one they forced the doors, and each cabin proved to be filled with fur.

"There's food somewhere," he insisted.

"If there isn't, Stanley's fate will be ours—warmth, shelter, and starvation," the girl answered.

Matt pulled aside the floor covering and considered a rather large hatch covering for a craft of that tonnage. An iron ring, set into the wood, refused to budge when he heaved on it. Again the bar and their combined efforts prevailed. The covering crashed back, revealing an ice-choked hold.

"Let's have several candles," he said, descending the short ladder. "Also the ax and a shovel."

A layer of casks was visible under a coating of ice several inches in thickness.

"Alice," he shouted, "there're stores enough here to feed an army."

"The water must have ruined them," she said.

"Probably. But if water seeped in slowly and froze as it seeped, then the contents of some of the casks should be in good condition," Matt answered.

He crawled about, trying to read the lettering on the casks. Presently he stopped and began chopping.

"Here's one marked 'Chocolate,'" he said. "I'm going to have a try at it."

Alice descended and stood by, holding a candle while he chopped. He cut through the head of the cask and scooped out a quantity of chips and moldy chocolate. Breathless, the girl watched while he tugged. Matt came up with a slab of good chocolate two inches thick and several inches square.

He tasted a crumb. "It's bitter. See what you can do with it, while I search for something else."

"Hadn't you better rest?" she suggested.

His body swayed back and forth, and it looked as if he might topple over any moment.

He shook his head. Working on sheer nerve and the excitement of the discovery, he knew the moment he let down he was through for several hours—possibly longer. The dogs were in desperate need of attention, also.

Matt located a cask marked "Flour," as Alice announced the chocolate was ready.

"I'll be up in a few minutes," he answered. "It's beginning to look like flapjacks for breakfast," he added with a grunt. "You might send down a bucket."

The flour was dark, and he chopped it out in solid chunks that looked anything but appetizing.

"And it doesn't smell very good either," he said as he placed the half-filled bucket on the cabin table. "But it should make good dog food."

HE dropped into the nearest chair, picked up the cup of hot chocolate, and sipped it slowly. For all the bitterness it was the best drink he had ever tasted. Presently he fixed his eyes on a heavy beam, and an odd expression came over his face.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"The letters chiseled in that beam," he answered. "They're almost filled in with paint." He

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climbed on a bench and began scraping the paint with a knife. Slowly he deciphered: "*Explorer*, New Bedford, 1852."

"*Explorer!*" Alice exclaimed. "Why, wasn't that the schooner sent out in the late '60s to find the Northwest Passage?"

"Exactly!" he answered, with growing excitement. "She was never heard of again. It's ironical in a way, too. Stanley put in his spare time gathering every scrap of evidence touching the *Explorer*. He spent his leaves of absence searching the arctic shore for trace of her wreckage."

"And then he found her and died aboard," Alice said.

"But Dunak found her first," Matt added. "She had five years' provisions aboard. With her as a source of food supply it was an easy matter to keep a considerable gang of renegades working the barrens and the arctic. Why, there's everything—food, clothing, tools, and probably powder and ammunition."

He reasoned the flour must be good, or Dunak's men would not have depended on it. He tasted a flapjack and found it excellent.

"Have one, Alice, but go light—our stomachs aren't in any too good condition to receive heavy food."

Later he fed the dogs lightly and brought them into the cabin. The gaunt, starved creatures deserved any warmth and comfort he might give them.

As a final task before turning in, Matt opened a porthole and cleared away the ice as a means of ventilation, then he barred the door against a surprise attack. He hoped Dunak would feel that his cache, frozen in the ice, was safe from discovery, but Matt was not depending on it. Death, up to the present time, had been a strong possibility, but now if they were captured, it was a certainty.

A week passed without incident. The hold yielded casks of meat, clothing, gunpowder, and wine. The dogs ate ravenously, and Matt and Alice increased their own fare daily.

"And now what?" she asked on the tenth night aboard the wreck.

"We'll return, and I'll make a confidential report stating what has happened. The furs will be confiscated by the Crown and an expedition sent by schooner, through the Bering Sea and into the arctic, to transport everything of value aboard the *Explorer* to Vancouver. The report will show, of course, that Constable Stanley discovered the lost wreck," he added. "And after that——" He shrugged his shoulders and avoided her eyes. "My—trial and remorse. A bleak outlook. We'll start in a day or two."

He got into his sleeping bag, spread on a bunk. She saw his shoulders lift heavily in a depressing sigh, then his voice came, carrying a new note of resignation:

"Good night, Alice."

CHAPTER XII.

COCHET'S KNIFE.

ALICE KIRBY lay in her sleeping bag and watched Matt Cronin twist and turn in the bunk across the cabin. He was fighting remorse this night, as he had done on other occasions. But the girl knew his physical exhaustion would prevail in the end, and that he would fall into a stupor that would continue until she awakened him in the morning. What reserve strength he built up during the night was usually exhausted in the hours he spent below decks chopping away ice and removing casks of food.

She turned over several times, but

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could not sleep. The glowing fire in the coal heater cast grotesque shadows on the wall. Now and then a dog stirred, but mostly the tired creatures slept, heedless of possible peril.

"Queer," she muttered, "but I can't shake off a sense of impending danger." She was half tempted to awaken Matt, but decided such a course was selfish.

Somewhere deep in the vessel a timber groaned under the terrible burden of ice. She heard a soft rustling sound, like the brushing of a parka skirt against ice, or the footfall of a moccasin. Alice sat bolt upright and stared at the doorknob. Perhaps it was imagination, but she was positive it turned, though in the vague shadows nothing was really certain.

The girl listened with beating heart for several minutes. Nothing happened. "I guess thinking what is ahead of Matt has upset me. He's taking his killing Al hard. Poetic justice. He should never have fired to frighten Al. Things do happen that aren't intended. The Crown won't call it murder, perhaps. Manslaughter, with a long term in prison, to think, to relive the terrible moment over and over again. Hanging would be merciful."

She found herself losing some of her own bitterness, and resented it. After all, Matt killed Al. She must never forget that. She glanced about, startled. She felt suddenly cold—a superstitious chill, rather than physical. It seemed almost as if Al's spirit had suddenly come into the silent cabin to plead Matt's cause.

That, she told herself, was nonsense. She explained it by remembering that Al invariably excused the other fellow. He would arrest a desperate criminal and work harder searching out extenuating circumstances than he did unearthing evidence that would convict.

She turned over on her side and closed her eyes. There was no sound save the beating of her heart in her ears. She could feel the pulsations in the pit of her stomach. "Weakness and nervous fear," she muttered. "Alice, get hold of yourself."

A dog scratched itself, and she almost jumped out of her bag. She turned over again, and presently things grew vague. Al came and told Matt everything was all right, but only Matt and she seemed to sense his presence. There were others around, but they neither heard nor saw Al.

Al walked across a crowded room to a robed figure sitting on a bench.

"But you don't understand," he pleaded. "Matt didn't intend killing me. Don't you see? We both were victims of Dunak's trickery. He played one against the other. You can't hang Matt for that."

The robed figure ignored the plea. "—and there hanged by the neck until dead! Dead! Dead!"

"Thank you," Matt answered. "I was afraid you'd let me live."

The haunting expression in Matt's eyes tortured her. Al said clearly:

"Go to him, Alice!"

She started to go, but an invisible hand clutched her throat, shutting off her breath.

She tried to breathe, and when breath came, screamed:

"Matt! Matt!"

ALICE'S own voice awakened her. She was gasping desperately for air. It filled her lungs, but it poisoned them. Alice kicked the sleeping bag free and rolled from the bunk. Objects swam before her

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eyes. The coal fire glowed, each spot of light a malignant red eye.

Alice stumbled to the porthole. A breath of fresh air would straighten her out and end the feeling of utter oppression. She thrust her hand into the porthole and found melting ice had closed it tightly.

She turned and ran to Matt, trying desperately to arouse him. He stared stupidly into her eyes and muttered something she did not understand. She got him to his feet and slapped his cheeks.

"Matt! You must wake up! Something is wrong. Even the dogs are in a stupor."

"Open—door," he muttered.

She ran to the door and tugged desperately at the knob. It refused to yield.

"Put out—fire," he muttered as he reeled about.

The girl opened the stove and poured melted snow on the live coals. Steam and ashes filled the room until she jammed on the stove lid. Matt fell to his knees and began tugging at the hatch covering.

"May be air in hold," he said thickly.

She helped him open the hatch. He pushed her down the steep ladder, then followed, closing the hatch behind him.

Neither spoke for several minutes. Gradually the stupor left them.

"When that porthole was stopped up by melting ice," he explained, "the cabin was sealed air-tight, except the chimney, and the smoke was going through that. The fire exhausted the oxygen. It was a close shave."

"The air's foul down here, too," she answered.

"We'll wait a few minutes more, then I'll go up and open the door. It stuck on you," he said. "We'll be all right in an hour or two."

"Strike a match and see what time it is," she suggested.

He held a flickering match to his watch. The flame deepened the lines in his face and sharpened his cheek bones and brows. It would take many times ten days to restore Matt to his normal physical self.

"Three minutes after four," he said.

"I must have slept several hours," she commented. "I thought I dozed off and immediately awakened."

"We'll go up to the cabin now," he said, "and open things up. Leave the hatch open, too, so we'll have the benefit of what air there is. I'll light a candle—you hold it!"

He beat the cabin door with a hammer to loosen up ice that might have frozen the door to the jamb, then tugged at the knob. It resisted his efforts.

"Here's the bar," she suggested.

He pried with all his strength, but the door remained tight. He took the bar and jabbed the point into the ice filling the porthole. A steady stream of chips spilled into the cabin, and presently he dropped the bar with a gesture of defeat.

"I've chipped as far as I can reach, and still no air. There must be ice several feet thick beyond that porthole. I don't understand it. We'll try the chimney—that can't have frozen up."

HE removed the stovepipe and thrust the bar upward. A shower of soot filled the room, then the bar struck solid ice. He pounded the lower end with a hammer, and again the chips fell. Again he failed to drive the bar through to air.

Alice looked anxiously into his eyes. "What do you think, Matt? Tell me!"

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"Do you remember how Stanley looked in that chair?" Matt asked.

"Yes, as if he had fallen asleep," she replied.

"He died of carbon monoxide poisoning," Matt bluntly informed her. "It was an easy death, and it was accomplished by sealing the cabin. It was a trick Dunak's diabolical mind would work out. He's trying the same plan on us, and it would have succeeded if you hadn't been restless. It will succeed if we don't act fast."

"How did he manage it?"

"A few blocks of ice shoved against the porthole supplied the base of the mass," Matt said. "Then he cemented the blocks into a solid piece against the porthole by slowly pouring water over them. A hole in the creek ice would supply him with water, and it froze almost as soon as it was poured. The chimney was stopped up in the same manner."

The dogs' steady panting filled the room. Matt stared hard at them. Every breath taken by the animals reduced the remaining oxygen just that much. He turned to the girl, and their eyes met. Slowly she shook her head.

"I know, Matt, they're taking so much air, but—they brought us through and——"

"Sure, they brought us through," he admitted, "but we may have to kill them if we're to live ourselves. Hold the candle; I'm going into the hold again."

He was gone several minutes, but emerged, breathing hard and carrying a can of black powder.

"This powder is probably worthless," he admitted, "but it may turn the trick."

"There's a date on that can," Alice exclaimed, pointing. "Nineteen hundred and something! It must have been placed aboard long after the ship stranded. If it had been part of the stores, the date would be eighteen sixty-something."

"By jingo!" he exclaimed. "You're right."

He opened the can, poured a small quantity of the contents on the floor, and touched the candle to it. The grains spluttered, and an acrid odor filled their nostrils.

He lined the space beyond the porthole with buckskin from a caribou pelt, then filled it with powder. Next he fashioned a crude fuse of paper and powder, and finally stacked a table against the hole and backed it with baled fur.

"You go down below," he ordered. "I'll hand down the dogs."

One by one the dogs went into the hold, then Matt touched the fuse and followed. As his head disappeared from view, the schooner shook from the blast. Bales and table clattered against the opposite wall, and heavy smoke filled the cabin.

"Stay down here with the dogs," he ordered. "I'm going up and see what luck we've had."

HOLDING his breath, Matt fought his way through the smoke to the porthole. Pure cold air came slowly through the opening, and Matt thrust his face against the brass rim and sucked deeply. Day was breaking, and he could estimate the damage wrought by the blast. Several tons of ice against the porthole had been shattered and blown aside. He risked only a brief glance, then, catching up the rifle, stood back and watched.

He was confident that sooner or later the man responsible for sealing them in would investigate the outcome of the blast and perhaps show himself.

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"Can I come up, Matt?" Alice asked.

"Not yet," he answered. "I'm trying to pick off the enemy."

Minutes passed, and nothing within range of the porthole moved. Then, suddenly, he saw a change. It was like the shifting of a block of ice. He stared intently and made out the head and one shoulder of a big man dressed in a snow-white parka. Both shoulders and part of the breast lifted above an ice hummock, then settled. Before Matt could bring his own rifle to bear, head and shoulders vanished. Orange flame stabbed viciously from what appeared to be solid ice a few inches to the left.

Matt jerked instinctively and missed instant death, as a bullet droned through the porthole and thudded against the cabin wall. After a while he risked a cautious inspection.

"I can't see a thing, Alice," he reported; "that cursed white parka blends perfectly with the ice. Come up and get a breath of fresh air, but keep away from the porthole."

Alice, gasping from the acrid air, joined him. The ring of steel came sharply overhead, then ice tumbled in a torrent into the hole Matt had just blasted out. A minute passed, then a deluge of water spilled across the porthole. Even as they watched, it froze and joined the slabs of ice in a single mass.

"We're worse off than we were before," Matt shouted, between fits of coughing; "the cabin is half filled with powder smoke."

"What a fiend he is," Alice answered. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. I'll kill the dogs. We're going to need every breath of air," he answered. "Try wrapping a damp cloth about your face; that may help."

He drew the six-gun and stepped over to the hatch. Alice held a candle, and the dogs' eyes reflected oddly in the darkness—twin pools of moving flame. Flame that was hopeful and confidently looked to the man to remedy matters.

"You can't do it, Matt," Alice exclaimed. "Itkilik, faithful old Moose, and the others."

"I guess you're right. You're going to need them to take you out of the country, anyway," he replied.

"But we're leaving together?" she asked, surprised at his tone.

"I'm going out and get that devil," he said quietly. "It's better than what waits for me at the end of the trail. Go below. I'll be down in a few minutes. Please don't ask questions," he added.

MATT placed the remainder of the powder against the cabin door, backed it up with casks, and covered the lot with baled fur. Again he touched off a fuse, then jumped down the hold and pulled the hatch covering after him.

"Over this way, Alice," he ordered. "I don't know what's going to happen—the deck may blow down, though it shouldn't."

A deafening roar drowned out his words and left their ears ringing. He raised the hatch covering slightly, and the wreckage fell back. A rush of icy air poured into the hold.

"I blew that door clean off," he exclaimed. "Attack is the best defense—you've heard that before—so I'm going after Dunak. When it's all over, harness the dogs, load the sled with grub, and head for Cree Post. Take our old trail back. You'll likely meet Superintendent Blake along the way."

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"Matt, you talk as if you were going to die!" she protested.

"I hope—I am," he answered. "May I—kiss you? If you can find it in your heart to draw a curtain over the past year and skip back to the old days——"

"Oh, Matt!" she sobbed. And then she was in his arms. "I've tried to hate you, but I can't. Even Al is against me."

"Al?" he asked, puzzled.

"You wouldn't understand," she whispered, clinging tightly to him. "Poor boy! You've suffered so, with remorse. And you've endured my vicious outbursts and—— You're not going out there, Matt. The Force has taken too much from me already. It's not going to take you. We'll stay here, fight him off, then you will build a boat from the wreckage. There're supplies. We'll load it with sable and sail to San Francisco." She nestled closer. "We'll buy a little cattle ranch, work hard, and I'll try and help you forget, and you'll—help me forget."

"And what would Al say to that?" he gently asked. "Don't tempt me; I'm not very strong where—where you're concerned." He kissed her with infinite tenderness, then climbed the ladder.

Somewhere ahead Dunak waited, with finger crooked around the trigger of his murderous rifle. Matt didn't know where, but he knew the renegade would reveal himself the moment he appeared. Orange flame would stab suddenly from the ice—a bullet would drone.

Matt gathered all his strength, then, bending low, plunged through the shattered door, crawled over the broken ice, and raced into the open. A head, completely covered with white, save for eye slits, jerked into view. A rifle painted white swung and roared. Matt stumbled and went down. Jets of ice leaped upward as the bullet struck inches from his shoulder.

He got up and stumbled over the hummocks, his jaw set with determination, his sunken eyes pin points of unbridled fury. And yet there was about him the calmness of the arctic itself. The rifle roared again, and the click, as the renegade levered in a second cartridge, came sharply on the crisp air.

Two shots followed, and in their closeness was a hint of desperation—an abrupt sagging of self-confidence. Matt's six-gun cracked suddenly. He had no hope of hitting so obscure a target. His purpose was to hurry the other's aim. Another shot clipped fur from his parka hood, and he knew only a hurried aim had saved his life. Less than a hundred feet separated them when Dunak fired the next shot.

Matt's shoulder winced under a searing stab, then his right arm lost all sense of pain. The gun slipped from his nerveless fingers, and he went sprawling. A deep cry of triumph came from the renegade's lips. He leaped into the open, eager for the kill. His breath came audibly behind the white hood, and the fabric near his mouth sucked in and billowed out with each respiration.

Ice partly concealed Matt's prone figure. Dunak glanced toward the wreck's cabin, as if half expecting Alice might take a hand in the game, then he jumped to an ice hummock and looked down.

"Dead men tell no tales," he panted.

WITH willed calmness he aimed the rifle, and a gnarled, eager finger crooked at the trigger. Matt Cronin's shoulders twisted suddenly, and his left arm came out. Even

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as Dunak fired, the service six-gun crashed out flatly. Dunak's head jerked up, and his body stiffened in surprise. The rifle fell from his grasp and clattered loudly down the hummock, then the renegade pitched forward and slid along until he was abreast of the wounded constable.

Matt got to his knees. His left hand grasped the eye slits of the hood and ripped sharply downward. The hood fell in shreds about Dunak's broad shoulders, exposing the white beard and flowing hair of the Bishop.

Gone were the benign smile and paternal mannerisms. Instead Matt Cronin saw eyes filled with fear and lips twisted in hate. The clatter of a disturbed ice slab warned him that some one, one of the Bishop's men possibly, was closing in from behind. He whirled and looked into "Bloody Jacques" Cochet's hard eyes. The knife scar extending from the corner of his mouth almost to his ear was livid with emotion. Triumph? Hate? Matt could not tell, for the scar lent a sinister grin to the man's features that concealed all normal expressions.

Cochet's right hand carried the usual knife. A whip was coiled about his shoulders like a snake waiting to strike.

"Cochet!" Alice's voice came sharply from the cabin. "Put your hands up, or I'll kill you."

"Anything to please a lady," Cochet gallantly responded. "I can throw a knife from any angle—and throw it before your bullet could ever strike me down." Impudently he turned his back on the girl and advanced toward Matt and the Bishop.

"So, Bishop," he said, "you came to the end of the trail and found a Mounty there?" He shifted his moccasined feet, leaving the familiar track that invariably signified another death in Alice's mind.

"Don't let the devil knife me, Cronin," the Bishop pleaded. "There's murder in his eyes, Cronin——"

"Cronin can't do much about it, Bishop," Cochet sneered.

His eyes narrowed, and the gaze fixed itself on the Bishop's heart. The Bishop saw the knife hand move slightly and grow tense.

"If wood instead of ice lay under you," Cochet panted, "I could drive the knife through your heart and pin your treacherous body to it. Will you talk, or do you want to see what I can do with a knife?"

"I'll talk," the Bishop answered. He began: "In the barrens and arctic fur I saw wealth and power, but the Force stood in the way. It knew the amount of supplies shipped into the country. It would know if the flow of fur was diverted. An Eskimo reported this wreck. I investigated and knew my supply problem was answered."

"Talk is weakening you," Cochet cut in. "I'll talk, and you correct me."

The Bishop nodded.

"The Bishop got hold of Darnell, Zinkan, Luff, and others, and put the proposition up to them. He posed as a go-between for Dunak. They never knew Dunak and the Bishop were the same. Dressed in his white parka, packing his white rifle, he killed his men when they learned too much, or got too curious. Isn't that so?" Cochet asked sharply.

"Yes!"

"Shannon got hot on the trail and so did the others," Cochet continued. "They were murdered, either by the Bishop or his men. Then renegades dressed as Mounties disgraced the uniform and broke down the Force's reputation. Drunken brawls, fights,

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injustice, and all that. The Bishop, playing the rôle of a friend to the natives, won their confidence. They thought he stood between them and the Force. Oh, he put it over in great shape, and used the knowledge for his own ends."

Again the Bishop nodded.

"Who was Kennedy?" Matt demanded. "He attacked me, and I killed him in self-defense."

"My agent, who had worked his way into Blake's confidence and kept me posted," the Bishop answered.

"Now I'll tell you where I come in," Cochet said. "The Bishop got ambitious. He wanted my fur country. Well, that was a tough country. I had to whip a few and kill some of the worst in self-defense to tame it. I'm an ugly man with my scarred face. People usually think the worst of me."

Alice, who had joined the group, flushed.

"I don't blame them," Cochet continued. "But I realized it would be an easy matter for the Bishop to frame me. Appearance would be against me, so I trailed him as much as possible. But I never quite caught up."

"That explains why your tracks were always at the scene of a crime," Alice said suddenly.

"Yes," Cochet answered. "The Bishop learned my knife trick, my whip tricks, and in that way hoped to throw suspicion on me."

"And succeeded," Alice honestly admitted.

"Akadriak learned something," Cochet continued. "I never knew just what. But he waited for an honest Mounty to show up. And what happened, Bishop?"

"I killed him." He leveled an accusing finger at Cochet. "But you killed Garvin!"

"Sure! He ambushed me, at your orders—and he believed I was Dunak," Cochet answered. "But what happened when Cronin left Darnell, Zinkan, and Max in the stone cabin? I heard the shots and guessed what happened."

The Bishop confessed murdering them by a solemn shake of the head. Under the threat of Jacques Cochet's knife, he supplied details. There were scores of questions Matt Cronin wanted to ask, but he realized in the man's dying condition but a small percentage could be answered.

"Where did the dog, Moose, come from?" Matt asked.

"It must have been the dog of Constable Stanley's that escaped in the darkness—the night——" He faltered.

"The night you sealed up the cabin and left him to die," Matt suggested.

"A peaceful death," the Bishop insisted. "The dog was with you when the natives brought you out sick in the head. And now, that's all. Put down your knife, Cochet."

MATT thought hard, striving to penetrate the veil concealing the circumstances following his head wound. Moose, running wild, seeking a master, had evidently joined him. Itkilik had never left him, and that probably explained the friendliness existing between the dogs.

Cochet lowered his knife and drew Matt aside.

"Cronin, you're a dead shot. That's your reputation throughout the North," he said. "How'd it happen you killed Al Kirby when you were deliberately aiming wide?"

"There's no answer to that," Matt replied.

"I'm wondering. I've got an idea

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there is. I'm going to run a bluff. Keep away from me, give me a free hand," Cochet insisted. "I won't kill the old devil. He's dying anyway and will never stir up more trouble in my country—or any other."

"Go ahead, Cochet," Matt ordered.

Jacques Cochet approached the trader, knife in hand.

"You old hellhound," he snarled, "I've been watching you. You're dying, but there's been a glint of satisfaction in your eyes from the first. Knowing you can't live, you're going out feeling you put one over on the Force. Well, you're not going out that way. Two fine people aren't going to feel the weight of your dead hand as long as they live."

The Bishop's evil eyes changed. Again they centered on Jacques Cochet's knife.

"What do you mean?" he faltered.

"Come here, Matt," Cochet said. "He's going to tell you about killing Al Kirby. If he don't—I'll cut it out of his hide, word by word."

Lights were swimming before Matt's eyes. In his wasted condition the wound was telling. He gathered his nerve and joined the two.

"There's nothing to tell," the Bishop said defiantly.

Cochet's knife flashed and cut a slit in the Bishop's parka.

"The next one rips into the skin, Bishop."

"Matt, stop him. After all, the Bishop's dying," Alice protested.

"Keep out of this, Miss Kirby," Cochet snarled, and in the single glance he gave her, the girl knew how he had managed to tame one of the wildest areas in the North. "All right, Bishop. Out with it."

"I hoped to take this with me," the Bishop muttered. "I wanted to die, knowing I'd had my revenge on Cronin. But you wolverene, Cochet, you denied me it. Kirby, the hothead, tried to arrest Cronin. I watched them, hoping they would kill each other, but Cronin was shooting wide. Kirby, I saw, was trying to crease Cronin. And Kirby, like his father, was a dead shot."

The Bishop's eyes closed, and a change came over his face. The cruel lines he so cleverly masked in his rôle sharpened as death approached.

"Finish it!" Alice screamed in sudden terror. "Oh, finish it. Go out clean——"

"Finish it!" Cochet shouted.

Even with death closing in and taking the trader beyond reach of earthly threats, Cochet's sharp command had its effect.

"And so, when Kirby creased Cronin, I shot Kirby," the Bishop concluded. "I needed another year free of the Force to bring a schooner into the arctic and take my fur cache to Seattle. I watched Cronin, sick in the head, bury Kirby. He cried over his grave and put a pillow of moss under his head. Strange what a crazy man will do. He put moss—under—his head."

And there in the gray light of the arctic, Matt Cronin's eyes glistened with tears again. He swayed from weakness, but when Cochet offered to help him, he shook his head.

"I'm up to anything, now. You heard that, Alice—he said I didn't kill——"

But Matt Cronin wasn't up to anything. Relief and weakness crashed against the remaining shreds of the iron nerve that had carried him so far. He fell into Jacques Cochet's waiting arms.

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THE air was warm and fresh when Matt opened his eyes. He was lying on a bunk, and air was blowing through the porthole. Jacquez had torn out a partition and built a temporary door.

Cochet grinned. "You've got a flesh wound that isn't dangerous. And you've got a nurse that will pull you through," he said. "Blake is on his way, and will take charge of everything. I sent one of my natives to guide him."

"But why didn't you throw in with me at the beginning?" Matt asked. "You had plenty at stake."

"Plenty," Cochet answered. "But it was a job the Force had to do alone, if the Force was to save its face. And it did it alone. But for a man who has finished one of the toughest patrols in history, and is all set to marry his childhood sweetheart, you don't look very happy."

"You've forgotten it, but I haven't," Matt answered. "They say I killed Constable Boggs when he tried to stop me."

"I'm not sure but what you'd be better off if you had killed him," Cochet answered, grinning. "Constable Boggs is pretty mad, I understand. You see, you put him and his dogs into a freight car and locked the door. They didn't get out until they reached Vancouver."

THE END.

Coming Next Week, "MONTE VISTA'S MASQUERADE," by RAY HUMPHREYS.

SCORPION STING CAUSES FATALITIES

MORE lives have been lost in Arizona from the sting of the scorpion than from the bite or sting of any other venomous insect or reptile, according to the records of the Arizona State Board of Health. The records disclose 35 deaths caused by poisonous insects and reptiles in the past 6½ years, of which 25 resulted from the sting of the scorpion.

This record has caused the State board of health to declare the scorpion the greatest death menace among Arizona insects and reptiles, and far more dangerous to human life than is the Black Widow spider, about which so much has been heard recently.

PREDATORY ANIMALS TAKE TOLL OF $100,000

DESPITE an organized fight against them, predatory animals kill more than $100,000 worth of live stock in Texas a year, according to E. T. Personett, assistant district agent for predatory animal control for the Sanitary Live Stock Commission of Texas.

How much the loss that otherwise would occur has been cut down by commission trappers and hunters is shown in the report of the animals they killed during the last 4 months of 1934. During that period, Personett said, they destroyed 33 mountain lions, 453 coyotes, 151 bobcats, 225 wolves, 2 foxes, 123 wild dogs, and 6 other animals which prey on live stock.

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SIGN READER

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

BEYOND any doubt, Gabe Hartman was in the tightest place he had ever tried to slip out of. The fact that "Black" Juarez, the leader of the bandit gang that had hog tied him on the open range, knew his reputation for being the smoothest article in the whole Five Rivers country, made the situation all the more difficult. Gabe's abilities would have small chance to be put into play, while the two toughs, "Whity" and "Horse-face," guarded him, under instructions from Juarez to take no chance on his escape. However, Gabe would give them the best he had, and ordinarily Gabe's best was just about two jumps ahead of any other man on this range, as all admitted.

The hide-out, to which he had been taken the day before, was only twenty miles from the Long H Ranch, where doubtless "Claw" Hartman, father of Gabe, and some dozen riders would be trying to discover why Gabe hadn't showed up at the ranch at meal time.

What bothered Gabe more than most anything else was the fact that he knew that Dunc Moran was away from the Long H, on a special mission on South Clear Creek. If Dunc were at the ranch, he would have figured out what had happened before this and would be out somewhere in the hills near by watching for a chance to help Gabe; and if there were a second best to be considered in Gabe's class, when it came to range sabe, then Dunc was the man who deserved the honor.

There was more in this deal than

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the money ransom. Juarez and his men hoped to collect from Gabe's father; for it was Gabe who had given the most damaging testimony against the gang leader five years ago, when Juarez had been sentenced to prison for cattle rustling. For this reason Gabe did not believe that Juarez intended that he should go free, even if Claw Hartman should decide to pay the twenty thousand dollars demanded by the bandits, and should agree to leave it at the place designated in the letter delivered to the elder Hartman last night by Garcia, a half-breed member of the gang.

Several times Gabe had seen the hatred that flamed in the eyes of Juarez whenever he looked at his prisoner, and so Gabe decided that something more than just an ordinary bit of range craftiness would be necessary, if he ever hoped to put his feet under the chuck-house table at the Long H again. However, he did not appear at all depressed as he sat a short distance from the camp fire amusing himself by drawing sketches of the country on a piece of bark, with the soft lead of a cartridge he had found in his pocket, and which was the only thing even remotely connected with firearms left to him by his captors.

Gabe's drawing did not at all interfere with his seeing everything that happened in the vicinity of the camp, or keeping his senses alert to all that went on about him.

BACK at the Long H, "Shorty" Davis shaded his eyes against the sun and sighed with relief when he recognized the horseman jogging down the valley as Dunc Moran. He waited until Dunc was in the dooryard before he greeted him with the question:

"Heard the news, Dunc?"

Dunc Moran, old-time Indian scout, now foreman for the Long H, swung out of his saddle.

"How could I hear any news?" he demanded of the chubby-faced cowboy who had asked the question. "I've been on the south fork of Clear Creek for a week, and the only live things I've seen was cows, chipmunks, and whistle-pigs."

Clearly, Shorty would burst unless he got rid of his pent-up information.

"Gabe Hartman has been snatched!"

Dunc's clear gray eyes held Shorty's with a doubting question. "What's the joke?" he asked.

" 'Sa fact," Shorty went on. "Yesterday mornin' Gabe was ridin' up the valley above Wasatch, when a bunch closed in on him and took him prisoner. Me and Gene was ridin' up on the north range. Gene had a pair of field glasses, and when he saw a lot of strangers, he got the glasses out and we watched the whole play. But, bein' as we was a full mile off, we couldn't get there in time to help Gabe, and they got away with him."

A grin broke over Moran's face. "How does the Old Man take it?"

"About the same as you do," Shorty answered; "in fact, he laughed at first when we told him and said: 'I'm sure sorry for 'em.' "

"Sure he'd laugh," Moran agreed; "so would anybody else who knows Gabe. These bandits must be new to this country or they'd have swung a loop at somebody else than Gabe Hartman."

"I know Gabe is smart," Shorty admitted, "and the bettin' around the bunk house is four to one he gets away from 'em without a scratch."

"I'd go farther than that," Moran added, as he pushed his stirrup up, before unhooking his latigo. "I'd

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bet a pony that Gabe finds out things about these kidnapers they don't know themselves—takes 'em apart to see what makes the wheels go, and if he sees a scalp he likes, brings it in to be tanned before the week is out."

Moran dragged his outfit into the saddle-room and went into the house to report the results of his week's work on Clear Creek. It was clear that he did not take Shorty's news seriously. Claw Hartman looked up from the letter he had spread on the table in front of him as Moran stamped into the room; an expression of relief came to the rancher's face when he saw Moran.

"Hello, Dunc, I'm glad you've come." Hartman got up and closed an open window. "I saw Shorty talkin' to you, so of course you know the news."

"About Gabe?"

Hartman nodded.

"Yeah, I heard," Moran replied. "Now, about the number of steers on Clear Creek. I tallied out one hundred and forty-four head of prime top stuff. Thirty-two second-grade and no culls. I can bring 'em in any time you want to ship. They'd ought to be in the feed lots by October 1st. That gives us two weeks in which to——"

Hartman interrupted Dunc with an impatient gesture. "The steers can wait until we find out what happened to my boy."

Moran's surprise was genuine. "You don't mean to tell me you're worried about Gabe?" he asked in astonishment. "Why, the boy's pride would be hurt if he knew that you didn't have any more confidence in him than that."

For reply Hartman pushed the letter he had been reading across the table. Moran turned the paper and read the following from the sheriff of La Plata County:

CLAW HARTMAN,
Long H Ranch,
Wasatch, Colorado.

DEAR SIR: This is to advise you that a desperate gang of criminals is operating across the range from the San Juan. They are not ordinary bandits, but know all the hide-outs on the upper branches of the Five Rivers. The leader of this band of desperadoes is Black Juarez, an ex-convict. He once worked for you and is familiar with your range and financial standing. Take no chances at all with these men, but in case you learn of their whereabouts, send me word at once. Sincerely yours,

HARRY ARIE,
Sheriff of La Plata County.

For the first time Moran's face became sternly interested. "Juarez, eh?" he muttered. "Come back to make good his threat to get even with us for furnishing the evidence that sent him up; and it was Gabe that caught him blotting brands. If it was anybody else, I'd only feel sorry for 'em and not bother my head about Gabe; but Juarez knows Gabe, and he knows he can slip out of a knot of dried rawhide. This outfit won't take any chances on his playing his foxy tricks."

"I felt the same as you did at first," Hartman told Moran, "but since then I've studied the thing over from every angle, and I can't figure out how Gabe would have a chance in a million to get away, even if I paid them the money they demand. The boys wanted to get a posse together and follow Juarez's gang, but this I wouldn't allow, because if we were to ride in on Juarez's hide-out, the first shot they'd fire would be at Gabe."

"That was good judgment," Moran agreed. "In spite of Juarez bein' tough and havin' all the breaks on his side, I still believe that Gabe will find some way to outplay him. Our job is to be somewhere in the neigh-

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borhood ready to help when the time comes; and we want to take care that we don't gum up the cards when Gabe starts to deal. Suppose you get Pablo and a couple more good trailers ready to go with us, while I get a bite to eat and saddle a fresh horse. Gabe will be expectin' us to be around when he needs us."

Hartman started to do as Dunc suggested.

"There's one thing more, the rancher said. "This morning we found a letter tucked under the latch of the main gate demanding a ransom of twenty thousand dollars to be left at the old ruins on Crooked Creek. Probably they've got men watchin' to see if I send it, but I knew better than to do that; once they get their hands on the money, Gabe would have no chance at all."

"You sure was usin' your head," Moran replied, "but don't worry. Pablo ought to pick up the trail in no time, and the rest is up to us, or rather I should say—up to Gabe."

FROM the moment the bandit gang had captured Gabe Hartman, Black Juarez had found it difficult to impress his men with the necessity of constant watchfulness.

"You birds don't want to make any mistake," he told Horse-face, a border bandit from the lower Gila. "I know this puncher, Gabe Hartman. He's the fastest thing I ever saw with a gun, a knife, or a rope. He can make his eyes look as innocent as a suckin' kid while he's takin' the fillin' out of your teeth. I'm even suspicious of our havin' taken him a prisoner so easy, as we did—it just don't seem possible that he couldn't have outfigured us somehow, if he'd wanted to."

"What's the matter with you, Juarez?" Horse-face asked complainingly. "I never seen you so jumpy before. Anybody'd think to hear you chatter that we'd captured a bad man, instead of a smooth-faced cowboy, who acts like he was havin' the time of his life. Look at him now. He's got Whity and Snag bettin' on whether them chipmunks will run east or west when he tosses a rock at 'em."

"Yeah, and if you'll watch close," Juarez replied, "you'll see that Gabe wins four times out of five."

"What of it?" He's just lucky, but he can't fool me," Horse-face boasted. "I've seen foxy kids before, but never one that could untie a rope I'd put on his legs, nor one that could shoot his way past a guard like Whity or Snag, without havin' a gun to do it with, and them two hombres all set to stop him."

"All the same," Juarez went on, "I'll feel better when we've collected the ransom money from old Claw Hartman and got rid of Gabe. One thing I want you to get into your thick head—the first thing to do, if anything happens, is to bump Gabe. I'd rather fight a dozen men outside the camp than him alone inside, if he was to get loose."

"If you're so scared of this kid," Horse-face went on, "how'd you come to pick on him? There's other ranches on the upper Rio Grande that have got kids they'd pay money for."

The blood lust that gleamed in Juarez's sneaky eyes told of long years of hatred, nursed on the desire for revenge. "I had my own reasons for comin' here. Now me and you'd better go over there a piece and write another letter to Claw Hartman, one that'll turn him up and get results."

Garcia, the man who had been sent to take the letter to Claw Hart-

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man, demanding twenty thousand dollars for the release of Gabe, had returned empty-handed. All morning he had watched the place that had been designated in the letter for the money to be left, with no results. No one had come near the place. Apparently the Long H outfit intended to let Gabe play a lone hand.

Gabe's poker face had showed no sign of interest as he overheard the messenger's report to Juarez. He seemed to be the least disturbed of any of them in the news Garcia brought, but in spite of his acting so unconcerned, he was serious for once in his life, and just now was devoting all the knowledge of range life he possessed in order to gain information as to what was going on in the vicinity of the hide-out. Gabe fully realized that Juarez would rather see him killed than released, even for the twenty thousand dollars demanded of his father; but other members of the gang wanted the money for grub, whisky, and poker, and it was on this slim thread that Gabe himself was gambling his life, and not on the possibility of his father paying the ransom.

GABE had not been inactive during the twenty-four hours he had been a captive of Juarez's gang, and he had accomplished something, but he was by no means in a position to defend himself in case the Long H riders had followed the tracks of the snatchers and should attempt to free him. This he knew to be the greatest danger.

"I sure hope Dunc Moran gets back before dad's nerve breaks and he sends our boys out to try to help me," Gabe thought as he lazed a short distance from the camp fire. His legs were tied together, but his hands had been freed so that he could play the game with Whity and "Snag," a game he won whenever it suited his purpose.

Gabe knew that the governing impulse in any wild animal is to keep its line of retreat open, so that in betting the bandits that he could name the direction one of the little ground squirrels would run, he had only to watch and see which direction the chipmunk had come from, and then by throwing a rock near the line of retreat, see the tiny rodent scamper back in that direction.

The warnings of Juarez to his men, however, had put each one of them on his guard, and the slightest movement on Gabe's part was watched by several pairs of eyes. Gabe had unlimited confidence in Dunc, largely because the old foreman had taught him much of the woodcraft he knew, and he felt sure that if Dunc had returned and learned of his capture, that right now he would be somewhere in the neighborhood watching for an opportunity to communicate with Gabe. Also, Dunc would have recognized the ex-convict leader and would know that any attempt of rescuers to rush the camp would be the signal for some one to shoot Gabe first.

Gabe did not expect anything so crude, in the way of a signal, as the mimicry of a coyote's call or the nicker of a horse, from Dunc. No, it would be something so subtle that no one but a man who had gained his knowledge of woodcraft from the Indians, as Dunc had, would attempt it. When it came, Juarez might be standing within a yard of him, but he would never suspect it—of that Gabe felt certain; for that reason Gabe's senses were more alert as the shadows lengthened and the sun began to sink slowly back of the Rio Grande pyramids. It was the very time when an Indian would choose

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for some subtle coup. A thrill of expectancy tingled through Gabe's nerves as he lay back relaxed and apparently unconcerned.

Black Juarez was on the north side of the camp, discussing with Horse-face the best way to frighten Claw Hartman into paying for Gabe's release. Snag and the half-breed, Garcia, were busy about the camp fire, getting ready to cook the evening meal. Whity and another man, known only as Bill, sat with their backs against a fallen log with rifles within easy reach. It was their turn to guard the prisoner.

Gabe strained his ears to catch the slightest sounds from the spruce forest that surrounded the camp. He drew long breaths through his nostrils, in an effort to detect any unusual odor, and his eyes roved constantly from one open space in the forest to another. His face was toward the sun, and he shifted the position of his body so that the bright light would not shine in his eyes. If Dunc were anywhere in the country, Gabe must be quick to catch the signal that he fully expected would come before nightfall.

He pushed his hat back and looked off toward the ridge to the east. Both Whity and Bill turned their heads to see why he had moved, and decided that it was because the light shone in his eyes. Gabe lay quiet, his eyes fixed on what he supposed at first to be a white butterfly fluttering on the needle of a silver-tipped spruce. Looking closer, he saw that the insect suddenly vanished and, a moment later, appeared a yard or two nearer to him.

GABE looked around casually, as if interested only in the affairs of the camp. His guards were discussing the probabilities of collecting the ransom money. The prisoner's eyes shifted back to the silver spruce, watching closely for the phantom butterfly. There it was again fluttering in and out, among the shadows. The sun was sinking rapidly; in a moment the bright light would be gone entirely. Gabe watched as long as he could without winking and, with the last rays of the sun, he saw the ghostly insect fade away without any perceptible movement—the dark place beneath the branch showed no sign of life, nor were there any butterflies to be seen anywhere.

Gabe lifted his hat in his right hand, moving it slowly and replacing it at the defiant attitude of a rollicking cowboy. He rolled over and stood up, stretching his arms high above his head, and then moving about awkwardly on his hobbled legs. None of the bandits took their eyes from Gabe as he flexed his body and moved about, as much as his fetters would permit. Not one of them suspected that he was doing this to show that his hands were free, but that his legs were bound.

The camp ax lay near a log, and he picked it up and began splitting wood, which he tossed over the fire to Whity; an act of friendliness that Whity accepted without comment. Juarez went over to his war bag and got out pencil and pad. He and Horse-face began to compose another letter to Claw Hartman, in which they threatened to torture Gabe to death unless the money was paid at once. It was nearly dark when the letter was finished. Juarez brought it over to Gabe.

"Write on the back of it that you know we mean business," he ordered, "and sign your name."

Gabe took the pencil and pad and wrote slowly, stopping several times as if to consider what he wrote. Juarez stood near by, waiting.

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Gabe handed the paper back to Juarez, who took it in his hand and slowly read what was written, then glanced at Gabe, who stood leaning on the handle of the ax, his eyes flashing in the reflection of the fire-light. Neither man spoke for a moment; a silent battle of wills held Juarez. He glanced down at the rope on Gabe's legs; it seemed to be in position as far as he could see.

"What is this—a bluff?" Juarez demanded.

"If you think so," Gabe replied in a low voice, "you can find out easy. The fact is, Juarez, that you are all washed up, through, right now. You might just as well lay down and roll over."

If any one else had acted like this, Juarez would have thought it merely a childish bluff, but with Gabe—well, it might be different. Still Juarez was unable to see the slightest change in the situation. The face of the bandit leader was a study as he reread what the prisoner had written. He glanced about nervously, then folded the letter and walked back to where Horse-face sat some distance from the fire.

"Did the kid write what you told him to?" Horse-face asked.

Juarez nodded and sat down. His hands jerked nervously, indecision showed in his eyes, sweat broke out on his forehead. He watched Gabe swinging the ax as he split more wood. Evidently Juarez was puzzled as well as badly scared. He turned his head and glanced suspiciously behind him into the lengthening shadows, at the same time keeping an eye on Gabe.

HORSE-FACE got to his feet, went over near the fire, and threw on more wood. Gabe dropped the ax and hobbled back to where he had been lying all day. He was out of the immediate circle of light now, which seemed to increase Juarez's anxiety; yet he made no move to stop him.

From a considerable distance off yonder in the forest there came the mournful call of an owl. Gabe's body tensed; he leaned forward counting the seconds, while he waited for the answer of the mate. It came clear and startlingly near by. Except for Juarez and Gabe, none of the other men had apparently noticed the long-drawn-out cry or the sibilant hiss, which could be distinctly heard at the end.

Gabe stood up now. He was facing toward Juarez, but his eyes measured the distance to Whity's rifle where it lay. Gabe's right hand was in the shadow so that even Juarez, who was watching closely, failed to see the motion Gabe made when he tossed the cartridge into the fire. Apparently something other than Gabe's movements worried the ex-convict; he was watching the juniper behind which the owl must be perched.

Ashes and smoke spurted up from the explosion caused by the cartridge, and long before the surprised outlaws could figure out where the shot had come from, Gabe had dived past Whity and come up with a rifle in his hand. Bill fired at Gabe, but the bullet went wild. Then Bill's weapon spun from his hand, struck by a bullet from the rifle in Gabe's hands. Horse-face and Garcia turned to face Gabe, their six-shooters flaming, but the most slippery cowboy in the whole Five Rivers country was now under the protection of a tree trunk, from which point of vantage he ordered the bandits to "Stick 'em up and be quick about it! I'm sorta fed up with you cheap snatchers."

The strangest part of the whole

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play was that Juarez had not moved a finger. He sat exactly where he had been when the explosion occurred, staring fixedly into the fire, his hands half raised in clear view.

Dunc Moran's voice sounded from the juniper where the bogus owl had answered Shorty's imitation far back in the forest. "How about you, Gabe?" he asked. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch, Dunc. You can have the boys come and collect these guns. I'm afraid some of these bad men might hurt themselves."

Dunc whistled, and several cowboys rode in. Dunc directed Shorty and Gene to disarm Juarez and his men. Claw Hartman came up with the others.

"What happened to Juarez?" he asked. "I thought they said he was tough. He sure looks awful tame to me now."

"Oh, he's not too tough," Gabe replied. "I wrote on the pad he gave me and told him that I had just got word from Dunc, that he had Juarez covered and that he would send him out on the long trail if he made a crooked move. I also told him that I had cut the ropes that bound my feet and was free to do a little whittling on him with the ax if I thought he needed trimming."

Claw Hartman laughed heartily. "I don't know yet, myself, how Dunc managed to let you know we had found the hide-out and was waiting for you to start something."

"That was about the slickest play we've ever pulled yet," Gabe explained. "Dunc got on the side of the camp away from the sun and flashed a reflection from his watch case onto the needles of a silver spruce. It looked so much like a butterfly that it fooled me for a little while, and I had to watch close to be sure that it wasn't. But when the sun went down, there wasn't any butterfly, so I knew it was some trick of Dunc's.

"When Juarez gave me the pad to write on, I decided to tell him that Dunc had him covered. I had already cut one of the ropes on my feet, and knew I could pull the rest loose any time I wanted to. There was a second after the cartridge I throwed in the fire went off when I thought Juarez might call my bluff, but he didn't, and as soon as Dunc spoke, I knew that I had read the signs right."

WASHING MACHINE BOON TO GOLD PROSPECTORS

THE up-to-the-minute prospector is letting a washing machine motor "wash" his gold for him.

Where Arizona miners and prospectors once toiled in the broiling sun to "dry-pan" a few cents' worth of gold, they now are sitting in the shade while a dry washer, powered with a washing-machine motor, pans out the precious yellow grains.

Users of the new-fangled machine declare the old era of tedious panning by hand is gone. It was hard and long work for desert prospectors hunting gold in dry stream beds. The best a miner could expect was a meager existence unless a rare strike was made.

The ingenious mechanical device, which pans far more gold-bearing dirt, is powered by the washing-machine engine and through a bellowslike attachment blows the dirt and gravel from even the finest gold dust. All it costs to operate is twenty cents a day.

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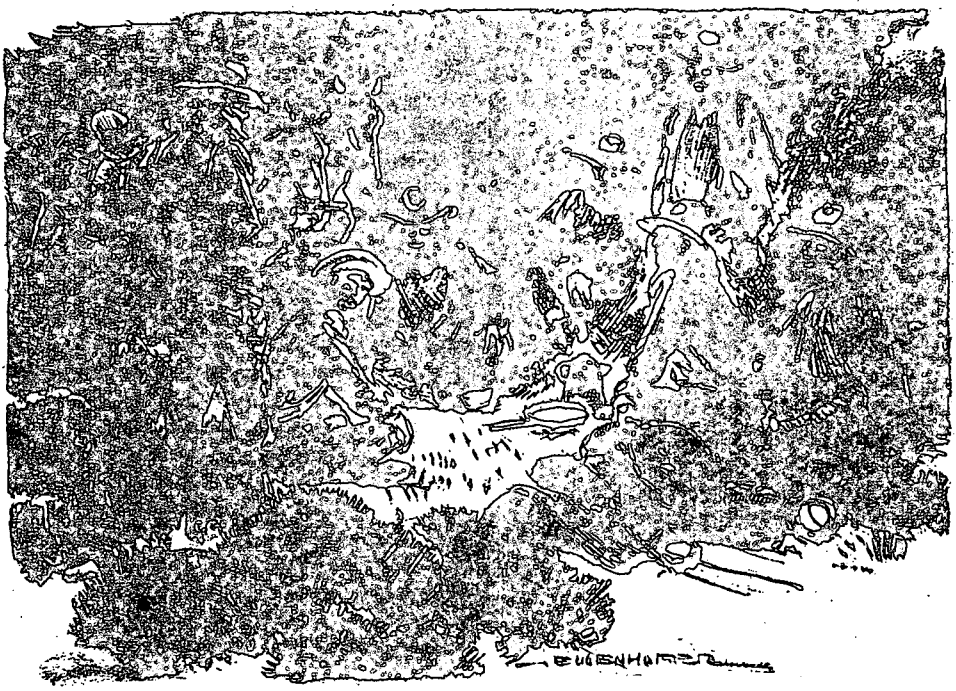

DUSTY CLEANS UP

By SCOTT DAMON

THEY were an odd contrast, those two. The owner of half the ranch land south of the Buckhorn Mountains was dark and handsome, standing well over six feet, with a good-humored mouth and laughing eyes. Mel Hammond was always popular with the ladies, but he was a man's man, for all that. That friendly eye could flash if the occasion was right, and the cattleman was the best shot in the Buckhorn country, barring only the man who stood before him.

"Dusty" Breen, who measured five feet seven in his boots, owned a pair of the bluest eyes in the world. They were looking at Hammond from under a mop of bleached hair and out of a face burned brick red where it wasn't the color of old saddle leather.

Hammond was a little over thirty, Dusty a little under, and each was convinced that he knew the other.

Dusty said, not too patiently: "I told you, Hammond, that I was through steamin' around the country, yankin' the kinks outta every ranch you take it into your black head to buy. This is a peach of a layout we got here on this place. We can make it pay big, if we don't go spreadin' ourselves too much. I can stand bein' foreman for one ranch at a time, but when you ask me to boss a whole litter of 'em, I draw the

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line. It wouldn't be so bad," continued Dusty, wound up and going at last, "if you'd stay in one State, even. But here you go and blow yourself to ten thousand acres over in the Blue Rock Valley, a good hundred miles away, and then tell me, as casual as you'd ask for a match: 'Just sashay over there, will you, and kinda get things lined out? Won't take you but about a year.' A year!" exploded Hammond's star foreman. "When I got a dozen irons in the fire here, and the chance to make this the best-payin'——"

"I know," Hammond broke in finally, "but, honest, Dusty, that's a better proposition over there than even this is. More cattle, more hay land, better range, a new, growing country——"

"And an eighty-mile drive to the railroad, by your own account." Dusty glowered at his employer, then gave up. "Oh, all right, you big buzzard! But that's absolutely the last time you move me. When I get things in running order over there, I come back here and stay."

Hammond nodded, suppressing a smile. "Agreed—if you want to come back."

Dusty's only reply to this suggestion was a grunt for any such preposterous idea that he wouldn't want to.

HAMMOND watched him throwing together a few things—Dusty could accomplish a complete change of residence with more speed and less fuss than a roving bear—and the rancher smiled again, strictly to himself. His faith in his foreman's adequacy to any and every demand was boundless. He believed that there was no situation that could ever baffle Dusty. His belief was almost childlike in its simplicity. Hammond's affection for this rather hard-boiled, quite fearless young man was deep and entirely wordless.

"Better take along your guns," he suggested.

Dusty looked at him. "A gun? What for?"

"Well," Hammond explained, "they've got a lot of wild cattle over in that country. The cowboys all wear guns. Besides, there is plenty of game, and you'll probably have to supply the ranch with whatever meat they get, outside of beef."

So Dusty got out his rifle and revolver, and looked at the latter with frank distaste as he recalled:

"I swore after we'd cleaned the rustlers out of these mountains that I'd never pack that thing again. Killin' men is a dirty business, put any name to it you wanta."

"Sometimes necessary," said Hammond soberly.

Again Dusty grunted. It was an old argument between them. The foreman rolled an amazingly small bundle into a slicker and demanded:

"What did you say was the name of this cock-eyed ranch?"

"The Fire Tongs," Hammond answered. "That's their brand, and I bought it. Bought everything, in fact—lock, stock, and barrel. Do whatever you see fit about everything that comes up. There's no strings on you whatever. If you get time, drop me a line about how you find things. I'll be in Sand Trap around the twentieth of the month."

"Try to," said Dusty.

He roped a horse out of the corral and rode away toward the October sunset without a backward glance. His work was well organized on the place he was leaving, and Hammond would put in charge the cowboy Dusty had mentioned.

Having resigned himself to the inevitable, Dusty Breen enjoyed his

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trip across the mountains. The higher slopes already flamed with crimson and gold. For an hour, on the second day, he rode in a scurry of early snow. Just before dark came, he stood on a rim looking down into one of the most beautiful valleys he had ever seen. This was the Blue Rock—vast stretches of mountain meadow that merged slowly upward into rolling, timbered hills, which formed the lower range for the cattle that were already working down out of the high country. The cowboy caught his breath involuntarily. It *was* a good land. No wonder Hammond had been tempted to buy here.

The Fire Tongs was not the best ranch in the valley, but there were none better. Three other men, Dusty learned, had holdings as large as Hammond's, and there were thirty or more with smaller ranches. There was a largeness and a freshness to it all that made Dusty wonder if that wasn't the way the pioneers had felt about the valley when they had first seen it.

He plunged into his work with a good deal more zest than he had expected to feel. Ten days after his arrival, he and two of his riders drove three hundred head of beeves to the west side of the valley, to join a herd that was starting for the railroad.

AFTER the cattle were thrown in with the others, Dusty turned his horse toward the Fire Tongs again. A rancher named Monroe stopped him to ask:

"Breen, you hadn't figured on coming with us?"

"Why, no," returned Dusty, surprised. "You got plenty help, ain't you?"

"Not your kind of help." Monroe's tone held a significance that puzzled Dusty.

"I don't get it, Monroe."

"Well," said the rancher, "we had kind of figured, from all we'd heard about you, that you were the man to head this drive."

"Nobody said anything to me about it," the perplexed foreman told him. What in Tophet was the man driving at?

Monroe went on: "We ain't exactly askin' you to pull our chestnuts outta the fire, you understand. Still, you're kinda interested yourself now, ain't you?"

Dusty's blue eyes had turned almost gray, as they always did when things began to bother him. He looped a leg around the saddle horn and pushed his sombrero back on his bleached hair.

"Monroe, what you're sayin' may make sense to you, but it don't to me. Sure, I'm interested. I'm sendin' a coupla my men along with you. Gage, who seems to be runnin' the show, said that'd be plenty."

"But he thought you'de be one of them."

Dusty said nothing to this.

"We-ell, then"—Monroe hesitated—"if you really didn't figure on goin' along with us, you—that is—well, you didn't say anything about your share."

Dusty, who had been on the point of exasperation, suddenly cooled to a concentrated attention.

"My share of what, Monroe?"

"Why, the money, of course," was the answer.

Dusty looked at him. "What money?"

It was Monroe's turn to look perplexed. "Surely Hammond told you?"

Dusty replied: "He didn't tell me about money, or my share in anything. You know, Monroe," he

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added good-temperedly, "it'd help considerable if you'd tell me what this is all about."

Monroe turned in his saddle.

"Gage," he yelled, "Come here!"

A tall, gangling, loose-jointed man of fifty joined them. Gage looked careless and rather shiftless, but Dusty knew that he was neither. He was one of the most efficient ranchers in the valley.

Monroe said to him: "Breen here doesn't know what we're up against."

Gage slid Dusty a look from under bushy brows, and nodded briefly. "I kinda figured he didn't when he started home just now."

Dusty had no love for puzzles. He picked up his reins. "And if it's all the same to you two, I'll keep on goin'."

Gage, sitting like a rock in his saddle, suggested: "Don't go off half cocked, young feller. I don't blame you for bein' some irritated. You see, Breen, the ranchers in this valley are up against the cleverest gang of crooks outside a jail. They don't rustle our cattle—nothin' so simple as that. They just levy tribute on every herd that goes outta here to the railroad. Somewhere along the drive, a masked man rides up to one of us and demands a hundred to three, four hundred dollars. If he don't get it, somewhere *else*, along the drive, we get our stock stampeded—and lose more than the scoundrels asked for. There ain't enough law in the country to do us any good, we don't know who these men are or where they hang out, and that stampede, if we don't pay up, is as sure as winter, no matter how many men are ridin' night herd. So—well, we pay up. We ain't particular proud of ourselves, but we pay because we don't know what else to do.

"Then we hear that Dusty Breen, who cleaned up a band of stage robbers and later a gang of rustlers, is comin' over into the Blue Rock to take charge of the Fire Tongs. It ain't that we're tryin' to pass the buck, Breen. But we've done all we could think of and failed. So we'd kinda pinned our hopes on you."

Dusty sat naturally still in his saddle. When he spoke, his question didn't mean anything to his listeners.

"Did Hammond know this?"

"Sure," they told him. "We talked it all over with Hammond when he bought the Fire Tongs. Seemed to us he didn't take it very serious, acted as if he thought it'd blow over pretty soon. Then we heard that you was comin' in to take charge of his ranch, and we knew he had taken it serious enough, sendin' a man like you down here."

Dusty could never remember being so angry. Hammond had pinned this job on him, deliberately. He had sent Dusty over here for the purpose of cleaning out a band of robbers. When he knew how his foreman hated this kind of a job, when he knew that Dusty had vowed never to be mixed up in any more gun fights. And Hammond had seen to it that Dusty took his guns—for wild cattle!

Dusty was so furious that he couldnt' even swear. The two men watching him saw his mouth straighten, saw his eyes turn icy gray. They congratulated themselves. Breen was living up to what they had heard about him. He'd take a hand in the game now.

Yes, Dusty would take a hand in the game. He wasn't backing out, not when things had gone this far. But when the game was ended, he would be through with Hammond. There was a strange, deep wrench in

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him at that thought. He said between his teeth:

"I'm going with you."

AS the six riders sat about the camp fire, the first night out, a masked man, gun cocked, stepped suddenly into the circle of firelight. They were caught off guard. They were such a short distance from home that they hadn't taken the precaution of leaving men with the cattle. Besides, the other encounters with the grafters had been in daylight, on the trail, and no guns had been in evidence.

The masked man held his revolver on Gage, and announced:

"Four hundred, this time."

"With the market what it is?" demanded Gage, not turning a hair. "Have a heart!"

"Four hundred, or——" The masked man paused significantly.

"We haven't got it with us," Gage told him.

"You'd oughta have it," was the short reply. "You know what was comin' up."

"Hoped you'd moved outta the country," said Gage jocosely.

"Don't get funny," advised the robber in an ominous tone.

"Give us a day to get the money," pleaded the rancher.

"Nope," was the decided answer. "Now or never for you. All I gotta do is whistle, and the others'll get your herd to movin' while you sit right here, all tame and peaceable."

"You ain't ever been so sudden before," Gage complained.

The robber turned his head slightly, listening, but not taking his eyes from Gage. Then he pursed his lips to whistle.

What happened next had to be explained afterward, because only Dusty understood it. Something hurtled through the air. Both of the robbers' guns went off, but without doing any damage. Then Dusty was on his feet. He wrested a weapon from the hand of the dumfounded bandit before he could recover. The cowboy bored the gun barrel into its owner's ribs and advised him to drop the other six-shooter. The advice was heeded with alacrity.

"What the devil did you do?" demanded Gage, rifle in hand and listening for the approach of the man's companions.

"Threw a stick of wood," Dusty explained as he searched his captive. "Next time I sit down in this country with my gun off, I won't."

All this had taken place in less than a minute. There was a questioning shout from the darkness. By pure luck the robber's companions had not been where they could see.

"Tell 'em," ordered Dusty, "that everything's O. K."

This command was also obeyed. The muzzle of the revolver had not moved. Dusty next told the man to sit down by the fire.

"You act," he said, "like you're just havin' a powwow with us. Play her up good and natural, fella, or you'll be lyin' on your back lookin' up for a long, long time." He turned to Monroe. "Be a good plan for a coupla you to slip out and see if you can find how many men there is. Don't move, you!"—at the prisoner's sudden start.

WHEN Monroe and a cowboy had gone, the others settled down to question the robber. But he refused to give a syllable of information. He still wore his mask, since the interview must appear, to any observer out there in the dark, as under his control. Presently Monroe returned to report:

"Only two men I can find. Both

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up the hill behind us here, watchin' camp, rifles cocked."

The robber uttered a sneering laugh. "You're a poor looker."

"There must be others," said Gage, "out on the edge of the herd, likely."

Dusty saw that their captive believed himself safe, because of those men on the hill. In proof that this was so, the man laughed again, leaned back, and stretched his legs toward the fire. In the seconds he was so engaged, Dusty flashed a glance at Gage, then at the fire, then at a bed roll.

Gage rose with a yawn and went to one of the bed rolls. He opened it and dragged out a big, old-fashioned quilt. The robber was following every move he made, and did not see the others crouch for movement.

Gage picked up the heavy piece of bedding and walked toward the robber.

"Guess this'll do you for to-night," he said—and dropped it over the fire, plunging the whole scene into instant blackness.

With Gage's movement, Dusty leaped upon the masked man, landing full on his chest and knocking the breath out of him. A moment later Gage exclaimed in a whisper:

"Well, by golly, you sure didn't need any help! What next?"

Dusty swung his prisoner around in front of him and shouted:

"Wanta kill your buddy, you birds out there?"

There was no answer, and Dusty went on:

"Shoot, if you do. We're takin' these cattle through to the railroad. Give us any trouble and this fella gets a bullet before we tend to anything else."

The cattle went through to the railroad safely, with the sullen prisoner in tow.

"What're you gonna do with me?" he asked again and again, and Dusty always replied, "Wait and see."

When they started back to Blue Rock with him, the robber, who said his name was Mahaffey, grew nearly hysterical in his demands. Dusty told him a little more this time. "Listen close, Mahaffey, and you'll maybe guess."

At the ranch, Dusty kept him under close guard. Then, one night, he let Mahaffey get away. Gage gave one look at Dusty's bland face and made no comment. Some of the others summoned to consider the matter were not so restrained. Monroe was angry.

"Of all the mud-head things to do!" he growled. "That bum has heard or guessed all our plans for takin' out the next shipment. We're startin' to-morrow, and——"

Dusty interrupted calmly: "We're not startin' to-morrow."

"The devil we're not!" Monroe was too angry to be cautious. "Since when have you been runnin' our business for us?"

Dusty glanced around at the six men who faced him. "Are you fellows with me, or aren't you?"

"I'm with you," Gage responded promptly. "You let Mahaffey get away on purpose. What's your plan, young feller?"

Dusty spoke for five minutes. When he was through, there was no question about the support of every man, except Monroe. He yielded grudgingly.

HAMMOND had waited in the little stage station of Sand Trap for three days. Still no word from Dusty. Maybe he hadn't been where he could send word. But surely a shipment of cat-

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tle had been taken out to the railroad by this time. Hammond decided to wait another day, anyhow, before starting East on a business trip that he had already put off too long.

That night, when he went upstairs to his box of a room in the boarding house, he found a note slipped under his door. At first the scrawled words made no sense to him, then he reread them. The message read:

Call off your dog. We know now who he is and the rep he's got. You get him out, or we'll put him out, heels first. We're givin' you four days to move.

There was no signature. Hammond scowled at the note, then laughed. He knew just how much chance any man had of putting Dusty Breen out of any place he had decided to stay. Then the rancher looked at the date. The note was three days old. The messenger must have been hunting for Hammond and only just found him.

A faint uneasiness began to stir in the rancher. Of course, Dusty would not need any help from him. Still, why hadn't he heard from him. And Hammond didn't like the tone of that note. It was much too coldly convincing. He thought of his trip East. He stood to take a serious loss, if he didn't make peace with a certain banker pretty soon.

Suddenly the dark head came up with a jerk. Hang the loss! Dusty came first. He rammed the note in his pocket and clattered down the boarding-house stairs, shaking the rickety building.

MONROE was in a bad humor. "I don't like it," he stated. "I don't like any of it. In the fire place, there isn't a Chinaman's chance that they'll show up here. Yeah, I know that Breen and Gage talked over the plan where Mahaffey could hear them, and he thought they didn't know he was listening. But that don't mean that those skunks intend to strike right here. We can't——"

"Ain't there a good chance for it, though?" The speaker was one of the seven men who had stopped for a night in a fireless camp at the top of a low watershed that formed a treeless dip between wooded slopes. "I, for one, am sure willin' to give it a try. They think we're movin' small bunches of stock in from different directions, that we'll join 'em all up here because, like Mahaffey heard, we've never been bothered beyond here. They've likely spotted the three little bunches the boys are bringin' up, and it ain't no reason for them to strike 'fore they got enough to make it worth the gamble. What's wrong with the idea, Monroe?"

Gage spoke before Monroe could answer.

"The only thing I see wrong with it," he said, "is that Breen insists on takin' the dirty end of the job. This is no more his kettle of fish than ours. But since the scheme is his, I guess he's got a right to have the say about that."

"I'd bet my hat," remarked another man, "that those coyotes will be camped across the dip from us before daylight. Those two riders I made out with the glass this afternoon were sure headed this way."

"In that case," suggested Dusty, "we'd better stop talking."

He spread a blanket on the ground, propped his head on his saddle, and seemed to go promptly to sleep. But he did not sleep for a long time. He lay wondering what he would do when this business was over. For the first time in his life, since he had become a foreman for

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Hammond, his existence had begun to seem ordered and settled. The roving cowboy had developed an unsuspected love for permanent things. He hadn't known that his roots had struck so deep, so quickly.

Up to this time, Dusty had refused to let his mind dwell on Hammond. He'd thought only of the land, and the job, that he hated to leave. The Blue Rock was a gorgeous valley. But he couldn't keep his thoughts away from Hammond, somehow, to-night. And suddenly the thing hurt unbearably. Hammond had pitchforked him into this —to save his investment! Dusty told himself bitterly that it was coming to him, because he'd been forgetting that he was merely a hired man, and not the personal friend, of his boss. The cowboy swore soundlessly, ashamed of the deep ache that seemed to go all through him.

His face was grimmer in the morning than any of his companions had ever seen it. They didn't question his suggestions, not with that glint in the blue eye, that tight muscle along the lean jaw.

There was nothing complicated about the plan Dusty had conceived. He simply rode down into the dip as the sun came up. He had sent two men out at the first hint of day, to try to locate the robbers, if any. The cowboys had come back to report that nine men were camped in the deep timber, opposite the place where the ranchers had lain out the night.

DUSTY BREEN made for that camp, as straight as an arrow. Behind him, under cover, the others of his party were deploying to right and left, with all the speed possible. His last word to them had been:

"Don't let a *one* of that gang get away—to shoot us in the back later. They've likely collected a choice assortment of gunmen for a final show-down with us, and we'll have to mop up, or the valley will always be havin' trouble."

As Dusty reasoned, the robbers were waiting for cattle to appear. When nothing appeared but a single horseman, they would, for the moment anyhow, be nonplused. At least that was the way that he had calculated.

What he had not calculated upon was the complete befuddlement into which the unexpected move threw the robbers. He had ridden right into the middle of them before they began to collect their wits.

Though it was the last thing any of them was thinking about, there was drama in that meeting—Dusty, narrowed-eyed and saturnine, sitting at ease on his flea-bitten roan, looking in the face, deliberately, one after another of the nine mounted men. It was as hard-cased an assemblage as he had ever seen—and he had seen considerable. He said nothing, watching them quietly, his hands resting lightly above one another on his saddle horn.

At last a man in a red shirt spoke, his heavy-browed, sallow face set in a sneer.

"Think you're some punkins, don't you?" There was a pause before he added with meaning: "Fred Cowles was a pal o' mine."

Outwardly, there was not a ripple of change in Dusty. Inwardly, every nerve had drawn taut. It had never once occurred to him that this crowd knew who he was. Fred Cowles had been the leader of the gang of stage robbers Dusty had exterminated, nearly three years ago. He thought:

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"It's a good bet that Red Shirt is the boss of this crew."

The man went on, wicked triumph growing in his face.

"You been lucky so far. Your luck's run out. You shoved it too far. A bullet can finish you, same as anybody." The tone became slow and judicious. "We won't be in such a hurry about finishin' you, though. It'll be kinda interestin' to see how much you can take without yellin'." He spoke to his companions. "If he goes for his gun, boys, don't shoot to kill. Just kinda knock the corners off."

Red Shirt cocked his revolver and lifted his reins. He edged his horse forward.

Dusty sat quite still, watching the man's eyes, and at the same time missing no move of the others. The hand of Red Shirt reached out to grasp the cowboy's bridle rein.

No man could definitely say that he saw Dusty Breen move. There came the roar of two guns, and Red Shirt's weapon was doing a comical flip-flop in the air, barrel still smoking. Nothing of Dusty could be seen but the tip of his hat and the tip of his six-shooter, across his saddle seat. It was not mere chance that Dusty always rode a big horse.

In a moment they would have had him surrounded, but one robber uttered a shriek of pain, pitching sidewise from his horse; and another yelled:

"They're comin' at us from behind!"

It was a busy quarter of an hour. Dusty, in the saddle again, running, shooting, wheeling with incredible speed, managed to pick off most of those that his companions didn't get. The dust was thick, and the uproar didn't help a man's aim in the least.

At last, seeing no enemy on his feet, Dusty made a quick survey of the damage. Four robbers killed, two wounded—and very quiet under a cowboy's gun—two ranchers wounded—one cowboy with a bullet in his shoulder. Dusty reflected:

"Men on the defensive are likely to be rotten shots. But three of the devils got away, Red Shirt among 'em. Scatter out, boys, and let's run 'em down!"

One cowboy told him: "I saw Gage go off after somebody. I was too busy to help him."

Dusty slid out of the saddle for a moment to look at the wounded cowboy, then he stiffened in his tracks.

Hammond dashed into view and flung himself from a foaming horse.

"Are you all right, Dusty?"

"I'm all right," was the cold answer. "No thanks to you."

Hammond became quite still, looking at him. Then the rancher walked up to him, and said without inflection:

"I don't get you."

"You wouldn't," Dusty began, and stopped.

Gage came into sight, leading three horses. One wore an empty saddle. The other two were ridden by robbers, neatly trussed in their saddles, their hands secured behind them.

"Holy smoke!" remarked somebody. "How in the devil did you have time to do all this?"

"I didn't," returned Gage calmly. "Hammond's the guilty party. He kills one o' the punks, and nabs the other two. Is just tyin' the knots when I rides up."

Dusty's knees felt suddenly weak. He and Hammond avoided each other's eyes.

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BACK in the Blue Rock Valley, it was two o'clock in the morning before all the work was cleaned up and the riders could go home.

Dusty hesitated at the living-room door. He knew that Hammond was wating for him. Might as well get it over.

The cattleman met his gaze directly. "You're sore because I didn't tell you what you were stepping into."

"Wouldn't you be?" Dusty came back.

"Likely I would," admitted Hammond, "but I never thought of your being. And that's a fact."

There was a long pause before the rancher went on. "It wasn't till I got that message that I began to worry about you. I knew they'd never touch you if you had a chance to face them, but they might get you in the back."

Dusty asked, "What message?"

Hammond told him, and asked, oddly hesitant: "It's—it's a pretty good—well, a nice layout here, don't you think?"

Dusty nodded. "Best I've ever seen." He had to go on, be honest. "I'd promised myself I was through with you—when this job was finished."

Hammond's dark eyes didn't waver. "Are you?"

The blue eyes looked back. For a moment the gaze held. Then their glances dropped, both men flushing a little. There was no need for words. They had seen something that would never again need excuse or explanation. Presently Hammond said:

"You're an equal partner with me here, you know. Now, don't get up on your high horse! That's the way I'd planned it from the first. You earned your share when you removed the only liability against the ranch. And if you want to do it that way, this place can serve as a sort of springboard toward a full partnership. I'll never be satisfied with less, Dusty."

Dusty tried to speak, then stalked from the room before he should play the complete sap. Hammond was thankful. He was close to playing the sap himself.

RAISING RATTLESNAKES FOR MONEY

TIRED of chasing rattlesnakes to their lair, W. E. "Rattlesnake" Smith, central Washington patriarch, says he is going to build a rattler ranch and raise the "varmints."

Smith, who is sixty-eight, claims to have caught more than eight hundred of the venomous reptiles for commercial purposes, and has been bitten twice, neither time resulting seriously.

He sells the skins to tourists for belts and neckties. The skin also can be used for women's shoes. The meat is as palatable as venison, Smith asserts, although more white.

Of this rattler ranch, he revealed, he planned to raise the snakes in commercial quantities if he can finance the venture, which will not be costly.

He never expects to give up altogether the chase over rolling, sagebrush-covered hills for rattlesnake dens, however.

"I catch snakes because I get a kick out of it," he declared.

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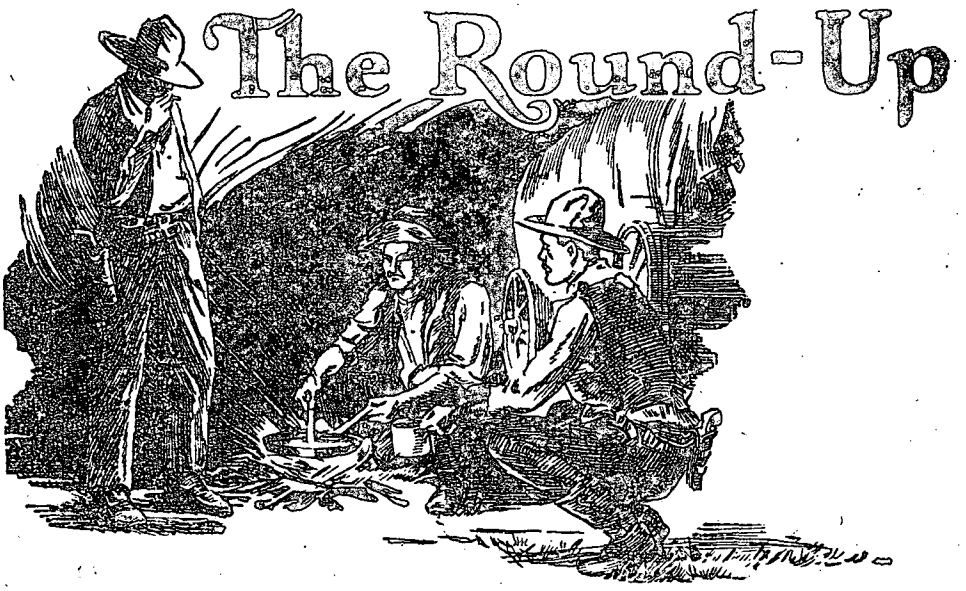

FOLKS, as we have remarked here on several occasions, professional critics can criticize forever and a day, but the best critic of a story is the reader, the man or woman who buys the book or magazine which contains the story that is to be criticized. He is not only the best critic, but he's the only critic that counts. Therefore, it comes to pass that we are not in agreement with what Bernard Beach, of 3330 Third Street, North, Minneapolis, Minnesota, says about reader criticism of stories in this magazine.

When you read Mr. Beach's letter, you will see that he takes to task some of the reader critics who have declared that they did not like certain stories. You see, if they didn't like 'em, Beach, they just didn't like 'em, and that's that. Author and editor have failed to please them, and that's the author's and editor's job—to please the readers.

Well, here's what Brother Beach has been kind enough to write us:

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: I have always wanted to write you my opinion of our magazine, and I have got around to doing so at last.

"I get a big kick out of the comments from readers of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine in The Round-up. It seems to me that the majority of readers do not really know how to criticize, especially those who comment against your authors and their stories. The majority of the criticisms are from what I call selfish people with one-track minds.

"I am a lover of adventure, Westerns, and mystery stories and have read countless yarns in these fields. I believe I have read at least one of every type of Western magazine, and so I believe I should know something about writers of Western stories. I have also read countless Western stories in books, and I can truthfully say that the stories in Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine on an average far exceed those in any other Western magazine I have read. For many years

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Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine was the only magazine I bought, and to-day it's still my favorite. I never miss an issue, save when I arrive too late at the stands and find it sold out, which happens every now and then, as the magazine is very popular.

"Your authors do not write dime-novel stories of the bloodcurdling type. The characters live up to the unwritten codes of the West respecting womanhood, hospitality, et cetera. Even the majority of the villains have some sense of decency and respect for the codes.

"Comments against Pawnee Joe are unfair. He always wins in the long run, and some one has to win, and every story must have its hero, every battle in life its victor. 'Pawnee Joe' is the victor because he is fearless, intelligent, and made of the stuff that makes heroes. A series of stories such as the Pawnee Joe one would end if the leading character were killed. Thus, he must stay alive at least until the last story is written.

"Life is composed of laughter and tears, and though it may be hard to believe, most comedy has some tragedy, and vice versa, so why do some of our readers insist in declaring against poor old Biffalo Bull? True, he is a liar, but who in this world can't pick out some one like Biffalo Bull from among his acquaintances? You may not regard such a person as your best friend but, nevertheless, do you hate your 'Biffalo Bull' friends? I have a friend who fills the bill for a perfect Biffalo Bull and I like him; in fact, I get a big kick out of him. It seems to me that these Biffalo Bulls really believe the things they are telling about. They're not deliberate liars; they don't lie to deceive, but to entertain and perhaps also to make them appear as heroic characters. They don't fool anybody.

"Indeed your slogan, 'The Best of the West,' is a true description of the contents of the magazine.

"May I add in closing that quite a number of years ago some of my folks found a son for a dying mother through your Missing Department.

"Best wishes for continued success."

Quite obviously such a letter as this one from our good and loyal friend and reader cheers us, encourages us, and makes us happy. Just the same we want to hear from those who do not like a story, and we are more than glad to get such letters. We greatly appreciate Bernard Beach's writing to us the letter that you've just heard but, by the same token, we're just as appreciative if a person writes us a letter and tells us why he doesn't like a story.

In order to succeed, we must please you. We know that it's a lot of trouble sitting you down, putting a new pen point in the holder, uncorking the ink, getting a piece of paper, and telling us why you did or did not like certain stories in the magazine, but this you can be sure of—every letter that comes here, be it praise or censure, is deeply welcome. We want the cloth to suit you, as many of you as possible.

For instance, we would like very much to know if the locale, the setting of the story, makes much difference to you. We know that, generally speaking, what counts is the story, not whether it's set on desert plain, mountaintop, or ice floe, but it may be possible that the majority of you like your stories in one locale more than another. May we hear from you as to this, and may we get many letters from you during 1936!

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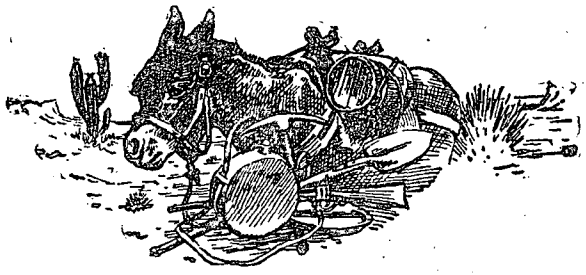

MINES AND MINING

By J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

A VAST stretch of tundra waste in the summer, a glittering sheen of dazzling white snow during the long winter months, northwestern Alaska offers the truly adventurous gold seeker mile after mile of virgin prospecting ground.

A new Klondike may be hidden there awaiting discovery by some daring prospector whose pot of gold will lie beneath the brilliant play of the northern lights—his arctic rainbow. Those who have already penetrated northwestern Alaska have brought back gold, and indications are that more, much more of the precious stuff remains in the virgin fastness of that far-flung white frontier.

The trip is no child's play. It is only the stout-hearted that Mother Nature beckons north of the arctic circle. She brooks no weaklings. Her favorites are the strong, and the brave. Them she often rewards richly.

Arthur C., of Macon, Georgia, intends to hit for that territory next spring. "I want to make a different prospecting trip, Mr. Thompson," he writes. "I want to get away from the usual haunts of man, away from the flivver trails and the gas-pump and hamburger-stand country. I mean I want to make a real frontier prospecting trip, and I've picked northwestern Alaska as the scene of my operations. Is there plenty of virgin ground left out there in which a man has a reasonable chance to make a decent strike? Or is that field crowded, too?"

To answer your second question first, Arthur, I don't think you'll find any press of humanity up in northwestern Alaska. Probably twenty or so one, two, and three-man camps spraddled over a thousand square miles of territory.

Placer gold has been brought out of that section, too, by the modern pioneers who have penetrated the country. Suggest you strike for the

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Kobuk River valley about two hundred and fifty miles, as the crow flies, north and east of Nome. Up in the valley you have two main areas in which to project yourself around.

There's the section near the little settlement of Kiana, fifty miles above the mouth of the Kobuk River. In this region Squirrel River and Klery Creek seem to be most promising.

The other general district, which perhaps offers a better chance for virgin prospecting ground, lies in the neighborhood of Shungak some hundred miles east of Kiana. Both settlements of course are well north of the arctic circle, and are the only ones in the Kobuk valley. A hundred mile stretch of wilderness separates them.

In the Shungak sector gold placers have been located already in the low-lying country bordering the Kobuk River, and close to the small streams that cut down from the mountains to the north. A very important feature in connection with the placers that have so far been reported here is the coarse, unworn nature of the gold particles. This, as well as other local evidence, seems to point rather definitely to a near-by origin of the gold in the mountains to the north. Pioneer prospecting toward the headwaters of the main streams and their numerous tributaries flowing down the south side of the Endicott range in this vicinity might result in discovery of small, richly concentrated placers, or even in locating the lode sources from which the placers were derived.

Further supporting this possibility is the fact that quartz veins carrying free gold are fairly common in the mountains which form these streams, or in the hills cut by them.

Another good prospecting bet might be crossing the divide near the head of the Kobuk River valley and examining the headwaters of the streams that drain the north slope of the mountains and unite to form the Noatak River, a westward-flowing watercourse running north of the mountains that shut in the Kobuk valley.

Transportation facilities and the comforts of home are conspicuous by their absence up in northwestern Alaska, but the section offers a mighty promising territory for today's red-blooded he-men who have the true pioneer spirit throbbing in their veins.

And a chap who hails from Chicago, Illinois, and signs himself "Pinky" Jones wants to know what a *batea* is. Pinky, a *batea* is the original version of the American prospector's gold pan, used the same way and serving the same general purpose. It probably came from Asia at the start. It is still used there, and by natives in both South and Central America. Top diameters of the *batea* run from fifteen to twenty-five inches. The dish is flattened cone shape as a rule, the sides sloping to a point of small rounded bottom, instead of to the flat broad bottom of the customary gold pan. And *bateas* are usually made of native hardwoods.

Whether your personal gold-prospecting tastes run to the distant frontier camps of Alaska, or the more accessible gold fields of the West, don't hesitate to write the Mines and Mining Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., for any pertinent information on mining or prospecting that you need to help assure your trip of ultimate success. And if you wish a prompt, personal reply, simply inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your letter.

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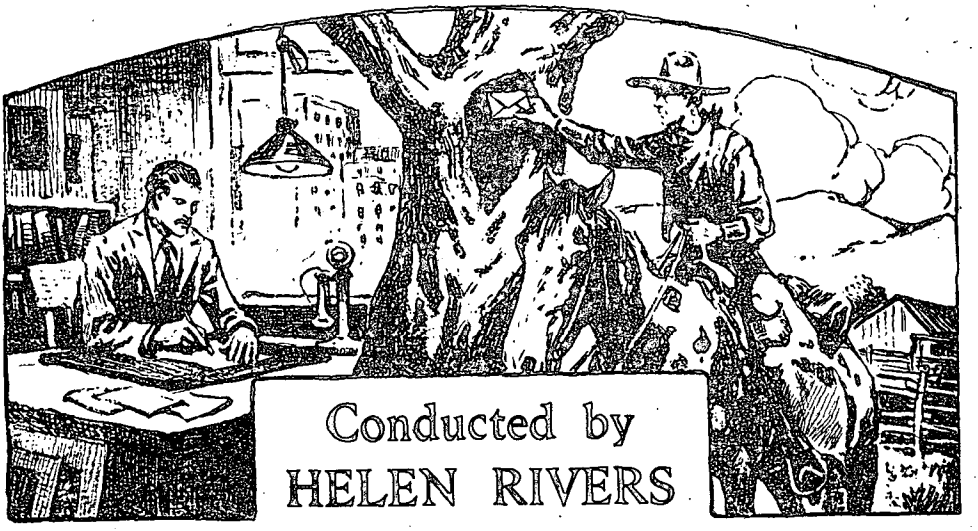
The HOLLOW TREE



It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y.

NEW ZEALAND, that bit of land that is not so far from the south pole, is a range-land country. "Gordon, of Otahuti," is a sheep rancher who can tell you folks about the three islands.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Hello, America! This is New Zealand calling. I am a young man of twenty-two, and I live at the lower end of New Zealand. In case you folks have scant knowledge of this little country, I will tell you some of the facts. New Zealand is about as large as Great Britain, and has six large towns, namely—Auckland, Napier, Wellington, Dunedin, Christchurch, and Invercargill. New Zealand is comprised of three islands, north, south, and Stewart islands. I live twenty miles from Invercargill, which is the capital town of New Zealand. The district here is Otahuti—you pronounce it O-ta-hoot-e. It is a Maori name. Maoris are dark-skinned people, and New Zealand was the only place where Maoris lived. But now white people have invaded and very few Maoris are to be found. I suppose there will be around two to three thousand still to be found in different parts of the islands.

The sea is about five miles away on the south side from where I live, and on the north are the Takatomes Mountains which

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are snow-clad and very high. New Zealand, as you know, runs north and south, and is about 1,200 miles from Australia. Norwegians come down here most years to hunt for whales in the Ross Sea, and have their whaling base at Paterson's Inlet, Stewart Island. They catch the big whales for the oil they get from them.

New Zealand is really magnificent for its scenery, and visitors from all over the world come each year. I live about two hundred miles from the glorious Eglinton Valley, and Milford Sounds. These I would say would compare with scenery around your Rocky Mountains. Throughout the whole island there are large mountains, big rivers, wonderful lakes, and very fine bathing beaches. Most mountains are covered with birch and red-pine timber. Our largest river about here is the mighty Waiau. It is about a quarter of a mile wide and very deep and runs very slowly. New Zealand's most scenic river is in the North Island, called the Wanganui. Though we are not so very far from the south pole, in summer time it is very warm here. In fact we work in athlete singlets.

Cattle rearing and dairying, and sheep raising are carried out in most districts. My mother and I have a sheep farm of three hundred acres, all flat and cut up into twenty-acre paddocks. We have nine hundred sheep—ewes. We have a six-horse team and one hack. From our nine hundred ewes which we cross with southdown rams, we get about thirteen hundred lambs Our lambing time is in spring—September, early! Southdowns are short, dumpy sheep with close wool, and our ewes are larger and heavier sheep with longer and coarser wool.

I am a footballer—Rugby—and racing cyclist, and I take interest in all sports. I am also very interested in American scenery, and I know you have it, too. I have just returned from a trip to Eglinton Valley, where I took many snaps. I do a good bit of sightseeing and I have some good photos to exchange.

GORDON, OF OTAHUTI.
GORDON G. GRIEVE.
Section 5, Otahuti, Invercargill, R. D.,
Southland, New Zealand.

This Quebec girl can tell you plenty about hitch-hiking.

I would like very much to correspond with girls from sixteen up—from anywhere, especially the States. My hobbies are sports, stamp and autograph collecting, also exchanging scenes, photos, and souvenirs. I am from Montreal, and I would be very glad to give any one any information on Montreal, as I know it from end to end. I am interested in hitch-hiking and I have traveled far. I can tell you many interesting stories of my experiences on the road.

RUBY BROWN.
6959 De Ste. Valies Street,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

You folks who are interested in far-off range lands will want to get in touch with Gordon, of Otahuti, whose stomping ground is the south island of New Zealand. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and drop a friendly letter to this sheep rancher.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

An Ohioan can spin a yarn for you hombres.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My age is twenty-one, and I'm out to rope a host of Pen Pals. I go in for all outdoor sports, and I have traveled over the American continent quite a bit and can spin many a yarn and tall story. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snaps. So come on, all you hombres, and give me a break.

WALTER L. WALDORF.
3806 Harrison Avenue,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Here's your chance to exchange arrowheads, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am trying to get one arrowhead from each State. And I would like to hear from men who live on big cattle ranches or horse ranches in Colorado.

HERBERT ALBRECHT.
41 Piano Street, Norwich, New York.

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Barbara is a junior member.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

How are chances for a Green Mountain girl to get Pen Pals? I live on a farm and go eleven miles to and from high school. I am fifteen years old, and a sophomore. I have never traveled, but I hope to sometime, especially in the West. I would like to collect some cowboy songs. Come on, folks, and write. BARBARA WEST.

Bridgewater Corners, Vermont.

This Pen Pal seeker hails from an old gold-rush town.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a lonesome young wife of eighteen, and as I have so much time on my hands, I would like to have some Pen Pals. I have traveled up and down the Pacific Coast, and for the past ten years I have resided here in the famous old gold-rush town. If any one cares to correspond with me, I shall tell them practically all there is to know about Sacramento.

MRS. MARY ELIZABETH GILE.

3132 Forty-third Street,
Sacramento, California.

Here's a Canadian miss looking for farm and ranch Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm just a girl of twenty, with a mania for cooking. I do believe there must be pioneer blood in my veins, for I often find myself wishing I had been born in another era, so I could have helped blaze trails and make prosperous farms out of wilderness. But since I wasn't, and since I must live in a small town, won't some of you lucky people who live on farms and ranches write and tell me all about the life I long for? I would especially like to hear from Pals in western Canada, and I will promise to make all my letters long and interesting. ONTARIO LASS.

Care of The Tree.

You folks who are interested in buried treasures, just sing right out.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Perhaps a letter in The Hollow Tree will help me to find a partner who is interested in buried treasures, and who can afford to spend a sizable grubstake in the recovery of one. I have been gathering data for a couple of years, and I know of some fine prospects, having been to these places personally and in some cases talked with eyewitnesses. This is more than just a chance at riches, as these locations are facts, not rumors, and I'll be glad to furnish further particulars to any one interested.

R. EVANS.

415 Dorchester Avenue,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

A New Yorker who has traveled invites you hombres to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Folks, how would you like news from New Hampshire, Oregon, sunny California, the Middle West, and the Virginias? Or possibly the glamorous New York City? Let's get busy, you folks of twenty or over.

NORMAN ROTHSCHILD.

Apt. 6, 273 West Seventy-third Street,
New York, N. Y.

From Montreal comes this philatelist.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am looking for some new friends through the medium of the old Holla. Come on, everybody; fill up my empty mail basket. I promise to answer all letters I receive, so if there is any one who wishes to write me, he will certainly receive an answer. I am a Canadian, twenty years of age, and have traveled quite a bit in the last year. I have several hobbies, among which is the very staid one of stamp collecting, and I would be glad to exchange stamps with fellow philatelists.

NORMAN GERAGHTY.

5223 Hutchison Street,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Here is a true-blue Pal for you girls.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Hello, everybody! I am a girl eighteen years of age, and I am seeking true Pen Pals. I would like to have a letter from every one, no matter where you are from, but I do want Pals who are of the lasting variety and know the meaning of true friendship. I will answer all letters and would also love to exchange snapshots. Come on, Pals; let's get acquainted.

COUNTRY GIRL OF IOWA.

Care of The Tree.

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WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE Rogue River Valley, in southern Oregon, is a section well known and loved by the sportsman, the miner, the tourist, and the farmer alike. With a keen desire to make his home in the Beaver State, Sid P., of Chicago, Illinois, is asking for information about a certain city out in this famous Oregon valley.

"Several years ago I made a trip through the Northwest, Mr. North, and was most favorably impressed by the Rogue River Valley of Oregon. I passed several days in Grants Pass, and this town seemed to me to offer an hombre just about everything he could desire, especially if he were an enthusiastic fisher and hunter as I am. At that time, however, I had no intention of returning there to live, and of course, I was looking at conditions from a tourist's standpoint. Now I'm interested in making my home in Grants Pass, and wish you'd spill all the facts a prospective home

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seeker should know, for maybe I've got the wrong impression about such things."

Well, it's pretty safe to wager that your picture of Grants Pass is not far wrong, Sid, but we'll spill all the facts and then you can be the judge. Grants Pass is a city of some 6,000 population, situated in a trade territory of about 15,000. It is the county seat of Josephine County, and the center of a fertile farming district. Placer and quartz gold mining in the mountainous areas near by bring in a steady stream of gold, while lumber mills scattered throughout the county add their wealth to the community.

In addition to the farming, lumbering, and mining is the really immense tourist business which continues to grow year by year as more people discover the excellent facilities for outdoor recreation to be found in southern Oregon. Located as it is at the junction of the Pacific and Redwood highways, Grants Pass, the only large city on the banks of the Rogue, has become a key point for tourist travel.

Celebrated as one of the greatest fishing streams on the continent, the Rogue River lures to its banks fishermen from the far corners of the globe, to match their skill with the leaping steelhead or to do battle with the lordly chinook. Nor is there an off season for the disciple of Izaak Walton, for fish are to be had practically the year round in this magnificent stream.

The hunter will also find this region much to his liking, for although the season is short compared with the months one can fish, there is plenty to claim the attention of the Nimrod during the fall and early winter months, with quail, duck, and deer all available.

In addition to the facilities for hunting and fishing there are many points of interest in the vicinity of Grants Pass. Within a few hours' drive of this city the Pacific Ocean, with its many delightful beaches, may be reached. Near by, also, are the Redwoods, one of nature's grandest sights; the Oregon Caves; Crater Lake; Diamond Lake; and many interesting old mining districts, the site of diggings famous about the middle of the last century, when gold was first discovered in southern Oregon.

It would be difficult to find a city with a more delightful natural setting. With an elevation of 963 feet, Grants Pass is located in a valley, surrounded by high mountains. This eliminates the possibility of high winds. There are no damaging electrical storms and no excesses in temperature. In fact, Grants Pass is noted for its climate.

Taken from the viewpoint of the person wishing to make a home

SPECIAL NOTICE

FAMOUS DISHES FROM ALASKAN ROAD HOUSES

The unique log road house of Alaska has played an important part in the history of this Territory, offering genuine frontier hospitality to travelers from early gold-rush days to the present time. Although not all of us can visit America's last frontier, we can sample the dishes of the hostelries of the land, for the editor of this department has collected some famous recipes, ranging from venison steak to sourdough cakes. A copy of these Alaskan Road House Recipes may be obtained from John North, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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where he may enjoy to the utmost, the pleasures of congenial friends and neighbors, an equable climate, unsurpassed recreational facilities, and an opportunity for making a successful living, Grants Pass offers an ideal location.

The Rogue River Valley of southern Oregon appeals alike to the farmer, the miner, the tourist, and the sportsman. With unsurpassed facilities for outdoor recreation, congenial friends and neighbors, an equable climate, and an opportunity for making a successful living, this region offers much to the man in search of a home in the West. For the address of a son of the Beaver State who will give readers firsthand information about this famous valley, write John North.

Feeling that the ideal location for him is in the Far North, Charlie F., of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is asking for information about one of Alaska's thriving cities.

"For several years now I've had my eye cocked Alaskawards, Mr. North, with the intention of trekking up there when I got together a big enough grubstake to keep me going until I could look that Territory over. I think now I'll be ready to set sail next summer, and the place I'm especially interested in is Fairbanks. Can you tell me if gold mining is the principal industry in that section at present, if much farming is carried on, and what the prospects are for a newcomer?"

We'll say you headed for a mighty interesting place, Charlie. Situated as it is in the geographical center of the Territory, and as the northern terminus of the Alaska Railroad, and with highways and airways radiating to all parts of the interior of the country, Fairbanks is the very heart of Alaska. This thriving city has a fixed population of about 3,000, most of whom are directly or indirectly supported by the gold-mining industry, which is the basic industry in this part of Alaska.

Gold was discovered near Fairbanks during the year 1902, and since that time the Fairbanks gold fields have produced nearly $85,000,000, most of which came from placer mining, lode-gold mining in the districts being still in early stages of development. Each year, however, paying lodge-gold mines are making their appearance, stimulated recently by the increase in the price of gold.

Ariculture is carried on to some extent in the district; nearly all grain and root crops grow and give good returns per acre. Practically all such produce finds a ready market at good prices, there being no competition except from similar goods shipped by boat and rail from Pacific coast ports. As the mining industry expands, so also will the markets for local produce increase, which will mean more work for farmers and their families.

Fairbanks and the district tributary to it offer exceptional opportunities for prospectors, miners, and farmers who have sufficient money in hand to look the ground over carefully, say over a period of a year, at least.

Fairbanks, situated in the geographical center of the Territory, and the northern terminus of the Alaska Railroad, is often called the "Golden Heart of Alaska." This city and its vicinity offer opportunities to the prospector, the miner, and the farmer. For an address from which descriptive literature of the Fairbanks section may be obtained, write John North.

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GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are coöperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer any letters regarding firearms if accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

JAY WILCOX dropped into Robertson's Drug Store in Phoenix, Arizona, on his way home from practice on a pistol range. Just then a robber entered and ordered every one to the rear. Wilcox had left his pistol at the soda fountain while talking with the proprietor, but as soon as the bandit started to leave with the loot, he dived for his gun and opened fire. The police could find no trace of the robber for several days, and then he was found, dead, in an automobile camp, with three bullet wounds in his chest.

In commenting on this incident, the *Arizona Republic* said:

"If all citizens were armed and trained to shoot, there would be fewer holdups."

We can't print answers to the hundreds of questions we get each week, but we do give you the most interesting ones.

Classification of big-bore rifles.

R. W. S., Aberdeen, South Dakota: Rifles larger than caliber .60 are usually classified according to their gauges, like shotguns.

Over-and-under.

B. M. P., Baker City, Oregon: Shotgun barrels are usually placed side by side, but when they are

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placed in a vertical line, the gun is called an "Over-and-under" gun.

Saloon guns.

C. F. R., Cadillac, Michigan: The word "Saloon" applied to guns means rifles and pistols of about .22 caliber, which fire very short rim-fire cartridges called "bulleted caps." These have a bullet, but the charge is the priming in the cap. The accuracy and range is negligible, but these guns can kill a man.

Popular European shotguns.

D. S. A., Dallas, Texas: In America it's Browning, Parker, Remington, and Winchester; in Europe it's Browning, Sjorgen, and Walther in the shotgun field. On both sides of the Atlantic there are other good smooth-bores, but these are probably the best known.

Small-bore names.

E. H. K., Eagle Pass, Texas: Small-bore rifles are usually .22 caliber, and in addition to "small-bore," they are called "miniature," and "low-caliber." "Miniature" is the British term.

Pistols and revolvers.

F. N. S., Fairbury, Nebraska: "Pistol" to-day includes all hand guns, but "revolver" specifies a rifled arm, fired from the hand, which has a cylindrical magazine rotating in rear of the barrel, this cylinder having chambers which carry cartridges and align with the bore in turn.

Old vs. new revolver extraction.

H. W. E., Gadsden, Alabama: In old-style revolvers the cylinder was rotated after firing and each empty cartridge was pushed out from the front, individually. In modern revolvers there is a common extractor for all chambers, similar to the extractor on a shotgun.

The .32-20 rifle.

J. N. B., Centerville, Iowa: The .32-20 rifle is not accurate beyond 150 yards and it is too big for small game. This eliminates it entirely as a practical hunting rifle. Reasons of economy give it a poor standing in comparison with the .22 Long Rifle as a target gun.

Accuracy in Akron.

Bernard J. Kennedy is a brave druggist in Akron, Ohio. Two armed robbers stood guard outside while two others entered the Kennedy store and took his cash at the point of a pistol. Mary Heindl, a clever clerk, slipped a revolver to Patrick Murphy, a customer, who opened fire. The robbers ran; Kennedy took the revolver from Murphy and gave chase, killing one and possibly wounding others as the bandits made their escape in a car. Akron can be proud of its citizens.

Peters's and Colt's have resumed sending free booklets to our readers. If you have not received these interesting pamphlets, write us now, and we will put your name on the mailing list.

The government supply of Krag and Russian rifles is exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, is sold to *citizens of the United States* for $8.85, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers who send us a stamped and addressed envelope.

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MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

NOTICE.—Would like to hear from or of the following three sisters or any of their relatives. Brokaw, Mrs. Anna Burr; Wilson, Mrs. Emma Burr; Castle, Mrs. Maude Burr. Mrs. Castle has a son Robert. They used to live in Canon City, Colorado. Mrs. Brokaw and Mrs. Wilson formerly lived in Hotchkiss and Denver, Colorado. Any one knowing anything regarding any of the aforenamed, kindly communicate with Mrs. J. J. Welton, Apartment 508, 50 Laguna Street, San Francisco, California.

HAROLD.—Please come home. Everything is all right. Mother wants you. Alma.

SILAKOWSKI, MR. and MRS. JOHN.—They and their family used to live at 13 Esther Street and later at 120 Lockwood Street, Newark, New Jersey, in 1932 and 1933. Any information as to the whereabouts of any of the family would be gratefully received by Private Freeman L. Cornelius, Depot Detachment, Fort Armstrong, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.

HILL, OSCAR M.—Supposed to be in the vicinity of Kilgore, Texas. His children need him. Please communicate with Freddie Scott, care of Princess Hotel, Marion, Arkansas.

MACKENZIE, FRANK LEE.—Was sent by his employers, the Railway Audit Inspection Co., to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on a job. His home is in St. Louis, Missouri. He wrote that the job would be finished on February 2, 1934, and that he would return home immediately. He has never been heard from since. The company manager says that he just vanished, for no reason that he can imagine. It is past understanding, as he was devoted to his little son. His parents have had no word from him either. He is thirty-five years of age. Has dark-brown hair and eyes and fair complexion. Is five feet seven and a half inches tall and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. Two upper teeth in front are out. Has a scar about the size of a quarter on the back of his head. Wears ruby ring on left hand. Usually engaged in detective investigation work, but might be employed in railway work as brakeman or foreman. His little boy is eight years old. Both he and his mother would be deeply appreciative of any word regarding him. Please address Mrs. Elsie MacKenzie, 1829 Hickory Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

GEER or GRAY, JOHN W.—Who was last heard from in Dayton, Ohio, around Christmas, 1933. He left there supposedly to go live with his daughter in Detroit, Michigan, but failed to arrive. Any one knowing anything further concerning him, kindly communicate with his daughter, Jean Hilts, 1075 Newport Avenue, Detroit, Michigan.

HOLLINGSWORTH, WILLIAM THOMAS.—He disappeared on July 13, 1935. Is five feet eight and a half inches tall, and weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds. Has brown eyes and hair. Is almost bald. Hair is streaked with gray about the temples. Wore dark-rimmed glasses. His teeth are out in front in both upper and lower jaws. Would be fifty years of age. His occupation is coal mining and bridge building. Was a member of the local union, No. 5509, Bunsenville, Georgetown, Illinois. When he left he was wearing blue overalls, blue shirt, dark-gray felt hat and black shoes, size seven. His wife needs his help badly in business and is worried at his absence. If he goes home everything will be all right. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly notify Dora Hollingsworth, 210 Vee Street, Georgetown, Illinois.

McKINNEY, HANCEL.—He is a deaf mute. Was last heard of in 1928 when in the State of Washington. Would be thirty-one years of age. Is five feet nine inches tall and weighed about one hundred and ninety pounds. Has auburn hair and brown eyes. Wore sideburns to the bottom of his ears. Is usually engaged in construction work. Has a great love for horses. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please advise Gailard McKinney, 301 South Jefferson Street, Abingdon, Illinois.

WRIGHT, TOMMIE.—He is my brother, and I have not heard from him for seven years. The last address I had was Lefors, Texas. He is frequently called Blackie. Has black hair and brown eyes. Is five feet eleven inches tall. When last heard from, he was married and had three children. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. M. M. Cain, Sebastian, Texas.

WINTERS, JOHN C.—Who left Tussy, Oklahoma, about 1923. He was six feet tall and dark-complexioned. Would be about sixty years of age. All his folks long for some word of him. Any one knowing anything of his movements since 1923, please write to J. M. Winters, *R. 1, Box 146, Ardmore, Oklahoma.*

MATTHEWS, EDWARD JOHN and HARCHELRODE, HAROLD.—Edward is my brother. Harold is his friend. His real name is Harold Payton. He was taken in adoption. They are both thirty-two years of age. It is five years since I have heard from either of them. When times were good they worked for the government on construction work. Have also been employed in circuses and carnivals. Any one knowing their whereabouts, kindly notify Clara M. Matthews, Room 311, Patricia Club, 2303 Maypole Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

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OWSLEY, BRUCE.—When last heard from, in December, 1934, he was clerking in a hotel in Walla Walla, Washington. Is six feet two inches tall. Has light-brown hair and eyes. Would be about twenty-three years of age. Ike, if you see this, please write. Any one knowing where he is now located, kindly advise Mildred Oliver, 522 North Oak Street, Ponca City, Oklahoma.

CHURCH, DAVIS H.—He was last heard of in Waterville, Maine. Any information regarding him will be appreciated by Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

YOUNGBLOOD, REBECCA.—She was in Baldwin, Florida, some time ago. Any one knowing where she is at present will confer a favor by writing to Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

MEANS, MRS. EDWINA M.—She was one of the F. E. R. A. visitors at 60 Gilmore Street, Atlanta, Georgia. Please write to Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

HAMILTON, JACKANLINE.—She lived between Tavanes and Eustis, Florida, from 1924 to 1928. When last heard of, she was in the West. Please send all information concerning her to Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

BATES, HOMER and FOREST.—Homer was in the U. S. army, stationed in the Hawaiian Islands, and Forest was in the navy. Their cousin is asking for news of them. He is Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

MARTIN, NELLIE, and JEFFRIE.—They were last heard of in Oregon. Kindly send all possible information concerning them to Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

SMITH, LOUISE.—She was last heard of in Tennessee. She is the daughter of Madam Nevada, a fortune teller, or Mrs. John Cumy. Please write to Earl H. Blanchard, 497 Pulliam Street, S. W., Atlanta, Georgia.

McDADE, MARY.—I would like to get in touch with a long-lost sister who, when a child, was taken from her home in Scotland to my mother's sister in Alabama. My aunt's name is Fox. Later my sister went to Dillonvale, Ohio. She is married and has a family. Her married name is Mrs. Frank Robertson. She has never been back to Scotland since she left, and she was too young then to remember anything about the country. My aunt and uncle ran a tavern in Alabama, and it might be possible to trace my sister through them. Any information regarding her would be appreciated by Mrs. A. McKillop, 8 Hamilton Place, Stockbridge, Edinburgh, Scotland.

JORDAN, ANNA.—She is forty years old. Has dark hair, dark eyes and light complexion. Was last seen in 1916 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Any one knowing her whereabouts kindly write to Nellie Horowitz, 207 Congress Street, Troy, New York.

MATRANGA, HELEN.—Who used to live on Spain Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. A friend who has lost track of her, and who misses her very much is asking for her present address. He has not heard from her in three years. Numerous relatives of hers live in Rockford, Illinois. Any one knowing her address, please write to Joe E. Motard, care of Western Story Magazine.

LYLES, ARCH.—He is six feet tall. Would be about sixty years of age. When last heard from he was in Monroe, Louisiana. By trade he is a carpenter and painter. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, kindly notify his daughter, Sybol Lyles Pyle, 1171 E Street, San Bernardino, California.

HAWK, BERNICE, and BESSIE.—An old schoolmate would like to get in touch with them. They were formerly of Cushing, Oklahoma. Any news of them would be much appreciated. Please address Sybol Lyles Pyle, 1171 E Street, San Bernardino, California.

LYLES, EVA.—When last heard from she was in Dallas, Texas. Her half sister would like to communicate with her. Please write to Sybol Lyles Pyle, 1171 E Street, San Bernardino, California.

FLEMING, EDDIE.—He has black curly hair and brown eyes. Would be twenty-eight or nine years of age. A sister of his lives in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. An old friend who has not heard from him for seven years is anxious for news of him. Please address Tommy Overholser, care of Western Story Magazine.

REID, FRANK STANLEY.—Usually called Dad. When last heard of he was living at 3855 East West End Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Also lived at 620 North Springfield Avenue, in the same city. In 1932 and 1933 he was a member of the brotherhood of L. E. and ran a switch engine in Chicago in 1916. Of late years he was ill and unable to work on the railroad. He would be seventy-two years of age. As the result of an accident in McCook, Nebraska, in 1891, he walks with a limp. His wife's name is Villa, and they have a son George. Any one knowing his present address, please communicate with Mrs. Anna M. Reid who is in a hospital as a result of a car accident. Her address is St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Anthony Hall, Fort Worth, Texas.

McDONALD, ROBERT S., Jr.—A veteran of the World War. Served in the navy. Is five feet seven inches tall. Has brown hair and blue eyes. Would be forty years of age. His wife's given name is Mignon. They have two children, Alan and Robert. In 1933 his father heard from him in Norfolk, Virginia. Has had no word from him since. It is possible that he may be in Highland Park, New Jersey. Please send your present address to your brother Henry, 2298 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, California. Have important news for you concerning the settlement of the estate of a relative who died recently in Kentucky.

PINDARVIS, CALEP.—He is my father. When I last heard from him he was in Texas. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly write to Mrs. G. W. Sumlin, 525 Rogers Street, Clearwater, Florida.

HUNTSMAN, EDITH ALMEDA.—She was last seen in 1925 at the University of Oregon. Any one knowing where she is now located, kindly advise Johnny T., care of Western Story Magazine.

BRANDT, GILBERT.—When last heard from, eleven years ago, he was living in Marine City, near Detroit, Michigan. His home was with a family named Ostrander, and it is possible that they may have adopted him and he is known by their name. Gilbert would be twenty-two years of age. Has blue eyes and light complexion. Hair is blond, almost red. His sister who was adopted and is now Beulah May Palmer, would be grateful for any news of her brother. Kindly send any information to Harold Morey, care of Earl Hess, R. 2, Marshall, Michigan.

LOUGHNEY, JOHN EDGAR.—On May 26, 1934, he was in Akron, Ohio. Has not been heard from since. He is five feet three inches tall and weighed about one hundred and seventy pounds. Has large blue eyes and brown hair. Is thirty-one years of age. Has a small mole on right side of his face. His friends call him Jack. He is badly needed by his children and any information concerning him would be thankfully received by his family. Please address Mrs. Lily Loughney, 105 Johns Avenue, Akron, Ohio.

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